

Conservative Claims of Cultural Oppression

The Nature and Origins of Conservaphobia

By Rony Guldmann

guldmann@alumni.stanford.edu

ronyguldmann@gmail.com

917-685-4463

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface/Summary	i
PART ONE: THE NARRATIVE	
I. Introduction	2
1. The Left is the Right and the Right is the Left	2
2. Conservaphobia	11
3. We Are All Liberals Now	17
4. Preliminary Questions	29
II. The Anatomy of a Worldview	35
1. Ultra-Liberalism	35
2. The Dissident Culture	45
3. Stealth and Subterfuge	50
4. Specious Asymmetries, Unacknowledged Symmetries	57
5. Indelible Psychological Differences	69
6. The Half-Savage Relics of Past Times	76
7. Stockholm Syndrome	84
8. Intellectualized Anti-Intellectualism	95
9. Concluding Reflections and Adumbrations: A “Larger Truth”?	103
III. Convoluted Stories, Right Eclecticism	112
1. The Liberal as Crypto-Fascist	116
2. The Liberal as Crypto-Racist	124
3. The Liberal as Crypto-Aristocrat	134
4. The Liberal as Crypto-Imperialist	143
5. The Liberal as Crypto-Theocrat	148
6. The Liberal as Crypto-Conservative	155
7. Concluding Reflections and Adumbrations: Conservative Conscientization?	162
PART TWO: THE THEORY	
IV. A Theory of Cultural Oppression	175
1. Modern and Pre-Modern	177
2. The Psychological Foundations of Liberalism	184
3. A Learned Blindness	197
4. The Symbolic and the Substantive	213
5. Deceptive and Self-Deceptive Histrionic Mimicry	220
6. The Meta-Equal Protection Problem	233
7. Concluding Reflections and Adumbrations	249
V. The Mutation Counter-Narrative	253
1. Squalor and Coarseness	254

2. Pre-Modern Relativism	259
3. Building Renunciation into Everyday Life	269
4. A Peculiarly Courtly Rationality	278
5. Church and State in Collusion	284
6. A Secular-Spiritual Whole	290
VI. The Mutation Counter-Narrative Applied	298
1. Crypto-Aristocracy Revisited	302
2. Cosmological Orientation	313
3. Grasping Treason	320
4. An Insurrection of Subjugated Knowledges	330
5. The New Class Revisited	340
6. Personal Tastes and Pretensions	353
PART THREE: IMPLICATIONS	
VII. The Ultimate in Sophistication	367
1. Expressive Moderation	372
2. The Amygdala Theory of Conservatism	381
3. The New Enlightenment	391
4. A Preferred Basket of Liberal Values	412
5. The Coulter Threshold	422
6. High-Spirited Non-Conformists	430
VIII. A Pragmatic Contradiction	441
1. Meta-Censoriousness	443
2. An Eternal Quest for Social Boundary Crossing	463
3. An Exhilarating Feeling of Momentousness	480
4. The Powerful Driving Force of Snobbery	492
5. A World of Victims, Villains, and Rescuers	505
6. Female Grade-School Teachers from Brown or Swarthmore	515
IX. The Secular Counter-Church of Liberalism	523
1. Truly to Be Neutral	525
2. The Meaning of the Secular	540
3. The Immanent Frame	548
4. Investing in Religion	562
5. Religious Neutrality as Ideology	579
6. The Shadow of God	588
7. Concluding Reflections	601
X. Conclusion (to be written)	
Bibliography	608

Preface

William Connolly writes that the crucial line of political division in the United States today lies between those who “infuse a large quotient of care for the future of the world” into their desires, identities, and politics and those who instead “infuse a drive to revenge against difference and the weight the future imposes on the present.”¹ This latter contingent of Americans has collaborated to create an “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” comprised of an ideologically diverse alliance of capitalist elites, resentful secular males, and evangelical Christians.² These constituencies embrace a variety of distinct belief-systems. But their sometimes incongruous ideologies are held together by a common resentment-based spirituality that smooths over doctrinal disagreements between this coalition’s diverse membership, uniting them in such causes as militant opposition to regulating SUVs, intense support for capital punishment and reckless wars, tolerance of gross economic inequality and state torture, and the demonization of those who embrace neither Christianity nor unfettered capitalism.³ Unrelated through these various causes may appear, they are but different manifestations of an underlying ethos that operates through, but is ultimately irreducible to, the distinct belief-systems of its followers. “Each constituency,” writes Connolly, “suppresses its differences of belief from the others to accentuate the affinities of spirituality between them,”⁴ with the result that “[e]ach spiritual constituency amplifies dispositions in the other, until a resonance machine emerges that is larger and more intense than the sum of its parts.”⁵ These Americans are united, not by any common set of ideas, but by a common pathology, a nihilistic drive to foment rancor and division, an inexorable hatred for the forces of hope and progress that has become a perverse source of spiritual fulfillment. This is the powerful drug that sustains the American Right.

Connolly articulates some common liberal sentiments. But where liberals see rancor and nihilism, conservatives see resistance and dissidence. They see the anger Connolly describes, not as spite and obstreperousness, a symptom of festering psychic conflicts, but as long overdue pushback against the cultural oppression that conservatives have for many decades suffered at the hands of people like Connolly, the so-called “liberal elites,” who have a vested interest in denigrating their grievances as some kind of raw, unappeasable irascibility. An “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” there may be, but

¹ William E. Connolly, “Belief, Spirituality, and Time,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), pg. 140.

² Ibid., pgs. 140-142.

³ Ibid., pg. 142.

⁴ Ibid. pg., 140.

⁵ Ibid. pg., 141.

conservatives insist that the root cause of that resonance is liberals' transgressions against them and the "ordinary Americans" they champion.

In what do these alleged transgressions consist? Different conservatives will frame the precise nature of their predicament in different ways. But the core of their common grievance is encapsulated in Joel Kotkin's indictment of the "progressive Clerisy":

In ways not seen since at least the McCarthy era, Americans are finding themselves increasingly constrained by a rising class—what I call the progressive Clerisy—that accepts no dissent from its basic tenets. Like the First Estate in pre-revolutionary France, the Clerisy increasingly exercises its power to constrain dissenting views, whether on politics, social attitudes or science.

The rise of today's Clerisy stems from the growing power and influence of its three main constituent parts: the creative elite of media and entertainment, the academic community, and the high-level government bureaucracy.

The Clerisy operates on very different principles than its rival power brokers, the oligarchs of finance, technology or energy. The power of the knowledge elite does not stem primarily from money, but in persuading, instructing and regulating the rest of society. Like the British Clerisy or the old church-centered French First Estate, the contemporary Clerisy increasingly promotes a single increasingly parochial ideology and, when necessary, has the power to marginalize, or excommunicate, miscreants from the public sphere.⁶

Unlike the old French First Estate, the progressive Clerisy is not an official institution with a formal membership list. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe that it is all the more insidious for this very reason. Enjoying the plausible deniability provided by a façade of democratic idealism, the liberal elites have quietly colonized a host of powerful social institutions—the judiciary, academia, public schools, large foundations, the media, entertainment, and others—through which they now pursue unofficially what earlier clerisies had to pursue officially. They do not marginalize or excommunicate in the name of some codified orthodoxy like Catholic teaching or Talmudic law. But conservatives believe that the cumulative social prestige arrogated by this "rising class" is the functional equivalent of such an orthodoxy, imbuing the liberal elites' pronouncements with a special power to cut off debate and silence dissent. Seeking above all to maintain this power, this new secular priesthood will badger, scold, and bully all who defy it. And this means conservatives. If they strike liberal professors like Connolly as angry and obstreperous, this is as a natural reaction to this new regime, to provocations whose very existence the elites refuse to acknowledge.

⁶ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/07/watch-what-you-say-the-new-liberal-power-elite-won-t-tolerate-dissent.html>

Conservatives feel culturally oppressed because they are persuaded that contemporary liberalism conceals an agenda that is culturally and morally “thicker” than the supposedly “neutral” abstractions of freedom and equality through which liberals officially define themselves. Liberals may hold themselves out as selfless defenders of the public interest fighting the good fight against the narrow prejudice and egoism of retrograde conservatives. But conservatives retort that these pretensions are an ideological screen behind which liberals attempt to foist a parochial vision of human virtue on an unwilling populace in a wide range of spheres, from politically correct education to avant-garde entertainment to creative constitutional jurisprudence. Conservatives can detect the machinations of a “progressive Clerisy” where liberals see only their principled policy positions because conservatives see liberalism as an all-encompassing vision and ethos, and not just a narrowly political creed. Much like patriarchy for feminists, Eurocentrism for post-colonial multiculturalists, and the bourgeoisie for Marxists, liberalism as now encountered by conservatives is an overarching cultural narrative of which the policy prescriptions are only a symptom. Liberalism is not just a political orientation, but a totalistic worldview and way of being that has by now crept into the American psyche itself and can always be discovered at work in the seeming trifles of social life and pop culture—suffocating conservatives from all sides. Liberalism is not sustained by reason and argument, but by the mores and pieties that liberals have quietly entrenched as the unquestioned, taken-for-granted background of things—a parochial ethos into which the populace has become progressively indoctrinated by small, often imperceptible increments. In issuing their claims of cultural oppression, conservatives seek to awaken their fellow Americans to this hidden reality.

While liberals have successfully pegged conservatism as authoritarian in the public mind, conservatives insist that the authoritarian tendencies of so-called liberals run much deeper than theirs. Diagnosing the roots of liberal hostility toward home-schooling, Kevin Williamson observes:

The Left’s organizing principle is control, and the possibility that children might commonly be raised outside of its control matrix is an existential threat from the progressive point of view. Institutions such as free markets and free speech terrify progressives, because they are the result of arrangements in which nobody is in control... Home-schooling isn’t for everybody, but every home-school student, like every firearm in private hands, is a quiet little declaration of independence. It’s no accident that the people who want to seize your guns are also the ones who want to seize your children.⁷

Like many on the Left, conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe that “the personal is the political.” Given liberals’ insatiable lust for control, what were once purely private preferences on how best to educate one’s children have now become political acts—“quiet little declarations of independence” through which to hold off left-liberal hegemony for yet another day. Conservative claims

⁷ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/389680/they-are-coming-your-children-kevin-d-williamson>

of cultural oppression seek, not primarily to highlight liberalism's flaws as a political philosophy, but to expose its transgressions as a *social practice* that works to demoralize and delegitimize those who remain steadfastly loyal to "traditional American values"—gun owners, home schoolers, housewives, churchgoers, the police, ranchers, small business entrepreneurs, and others. The ordered liberty of the conservative is a basic threat to liberal control and so must be targeted at every turn as a danger to the civilized order, the idea of which has now become identified with liberalism itself. If liberals are hostile toward the home-schooling to which some conservative parents are drawn, this is because those parents cannot be counted upon to civilize their children in the manner prescribed—that is, to raise their children as liberals. That is why those children must be seized.

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression see themselves, not only as the losers in a "war of ideas" that was always rigged against them, but furthermore as a quasi-ethnic group being encroached upon by a foreign colonial power that is endlessly contemptuous of their native folkways and bent on replacing these with its own supposedly more advanced culture. The *National Review* laments:

The crusade against private gun ownership is, for the Left, a kulturkampf. The sort of people who are likely to own or enjoy firearms are the sort of people who are most intensely detested by the social tendency that produced Barack Obama et al. — atavistic throwbacks and "bitter clingers," as somebody once put it. The Left's jihad against hunters, rural people, shooting enthusiasts, and Second Amendment partisans will do effectively nothing to prevent lunatics from shooting up schools or shopping malls. That they would exploit the victims of these awful crimes in the service of what amounts to a very focused form of snobbery is remarkable.⁸

Notwithstanding their ostensible egalitarianism and pragmatism, the liberal elites are committed to their own particular brand of identity politics, complete with its own special kind of otherization. The "bitter clingers" who stand in the way of gun control are not merely criticized as misguided, but despised as occupants of a lower moral and cognitive order, atavisms of a barbaric past that liberals alone have superseded. Whereas now eclipsed traditionalist hierarchies revolved around perceived differences in things like sexual purity, work ethic, religious affiliation, family pedigree, and ethnic bona fides, the new status hierarchy of liberalism is rooted in "cognitive elitism" and centers around a morally charged division between those who are "aware" and those who are not, those who possess the psychic maturity to accede to liberalism and those who lack it and must be reformed. This kind of identity politics will always take refuge in some pragmatic-sounding pretext—e.g., the dangers of firearms or the inadequacies of home schooling. But conservatives dismiss this pragmatism as an elaborate façade for a status hierarchy that liberals refuse to acknowledge. If this hierarchy can go overlooked by "thinking people," by the

⁸ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/425018/umpqua-shooting-statistics>

“educated,” this is because thoughtfulness and education are themselves now defined by the liberal dispensation. These have become mere badges of honor to be conferred on liberals and withheld from others. Liberals’ near-monopoly on the means of cultural reproduction lets their own kind of identity politics pass under the radar screen, camouflaged in an aura of hard-nosed utilitarianism.

Conservatives believe they see through this camouflage, however, and that the threat represented by this insight propels liberals to denigrate, not only conservative thought, but conservatives themselves. Alan Groves writes that “[b]y nature, many conservatives are placid, compliant, and respectful toward others. For the most part, we are civil, patriotic Americans who simply want to be left alone to be with our families (and yes, Mr. President, our guns and religion).” And so conservatives are left speechless and stupefied by the “never-ending onslaught of personal attacks, lies, and name-calling” that the Left rains down upon them.⁹ Conservative claimants of cultural oppression are united in the conviction that liberalism’s rationalistic façade conceals what is a campaign of psychological warfare whose purposes is to undermine the self-confidence of the conservative culture and supplant it with the liberal one. Hence the profound incongruity between the good-natured innocuousness of ordinary conservatives and the venomous vitriol to which liberals would subject them.

In prosecuting these verbal pogroms, liberals reduce conservatives’ deepest convictions to outward manifestations of unconscious hostilities—not positions to be understood but symptoms to be diagnosed and diseases to be attacked. While liberals may characterize their antagonism toward conservatism as just vigorous disagreement with a set of failed ideas, conservatives believe that this antagonism bespeaks something more visceral and reflexive, a primordial animus toward conservative identities for the challenge they pose to liberal ones. The real target is not anything the conservative may have actually said or done, but his basic God-fearing and freedom-loving nature, which the liberal elites despise as vulgar and retrograde. Hence the ignominious regime of mockery, slander, and intimidation that bullies conservatives into silence and submission. Knowing that liberals will seize upon any pretext to slander them as bigots of one kind or another, conservatives and the ordinary Americans they champion have been gradually reduced to quiescence, rendered passive and deferential before liberals, who have been privileged to define the social identities of conservatives.

This being their predicament, conservatives feel they must first overthrow liberalism’s cultural hegemony before they can defeat it politically. To this end, they strive to expose what they contend is

⁹ <http://thecollegeconservative.com/2012/03/27/conservaphobia/>

the Orwellian fraudulence of liberals' claims to moral and intellectual superiority—which are always being lorded over them by the dominant culture. Jerry Shenk writes in *The American Thinker*:

Objective? Diverse? Inclusive? Thoughtful? Reality-based? Benevolent? Not really. Progressives -- liberals -- are the worst offenders of their own axioms when they talk about the "evils" of those who dispute liberal versions of facts, policy, or, especially, morality. The bigotry liberals direct toward those with whom they merely disagree is staggering.¹⁰

Having anointed themselves the guardians of reason and enlightenment, liberals enjoy the plausible deniability to implement a sectarian agenda under the cover of universalistic virtue, like objectivity, inclusivity, benevolence, and so forth. But conservatives accuse that aura of superior virtue is only a sophisticated social illusion, the dishonest secular façade for moralistic or quasi-religious impulses, a hidden will to power that strives to uphold one parochial social identity at the expense of others. To this end, liberals have *projected* their own moral and intellectual vices onto conservatives, who are now held uniquely responsible for what are universal human failings. Conservatives have thus become the hated *Other* of liberalism, despised as uniquely parochial, exclusionary, thoughtless, fantasy-prone, and mean-spirited. They are modern-day scapegoats, convenient repositories for liberals' own sins and the one stubborn obstacle standing in the way of the liberal utopia that their final defeat would usher. The liberal virtues are in reality gestures of identity-assertion designed to come at the expense of conservative ordinary Americans. Imagining themselves uniquely objective, inclusive, thoughtful, and so on, liberals have cultivated an automatic social reflex that dismisses conservative opinions as mental or emotional immaturity, mindless reptilian instinct, unthinking fear and hatred that are easily recognized as such by sophisticated souls. With this social reflex having become integral to the liberal identity and with this identity now woven into the social fabric, conservatives find themselves suffocated by an insidious and pervasive conservaphobia, America's last socially acceptable bigotry.

* * *

In all these grievances, conservatism appears to have absorbed the moral and intellectual reflexes of the Left into itself. For the essential argument of conservative claims of cultural oppression is that liberalism has yet to extend its vaunted ideals—tolerance, diversity, understanding, etc.—to conservatives, the new pariahs. Motley though these claims are, their unifying impetus is in every case to place the Left's historic enemies—conservatives and especially conservative Christians—in the role which the Left has traditionally reserved for conservatism's alleged victims—racial minorities, women,

¹⁰ http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2012/08/liberal_bigotry.html

gays, and colonized people—while placing liberals in the role to which they have customarily relegated conservatives, dogmatic stalwarts defending their benighted, self-serving ways at the expense of other people’s freedom and dignity. The Left strives to expose the inequalities that privilege men over women, whites over blacks, and straights over gays. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression strive to expose the inequalities that privilege liberals over conservatives and thereby to remedy what they consider to be an inequitable distribution of moral and cultural capital in America today. This means exposing how the moral and intellectual failings that liberals would associate with conservatives are being subtly mirrored in liberals’ own treatment of conservatives. To expose this is to finally make liberals answerable to their own professed ideals, which it has now fallen upon conservatives to uphold.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression seek to *blur* what liberals accept as clear-cut distinctions between Left and Right. The Clerisy may think itself “progressive.” But Kotkin suggests that its essential attributes mirror those of the pre-revolutionary French First Estate, a paradigmatically right-wing institution in opposition to which the Left has defined itself historically ever since the Left-Right dichotomy was born out of the French Revolution. With the political landscape thus redefined, it is liberals, not conservatives, who are the stodgy defenders of the old order—and conservatives, not liberals, who are the defiant outsiders speaking truth to power. The conservative claimant of cultural oppression seeks, not to defend some traditional “order of things” before which all upstanding, God-fearing citizens must submit, but to unearth the *subterranean structures* of liberal discourse, to expose how that discourse naturalizes the unearned privileges of liberals as the timeless order of things, passing off a contingent status hierarchy as reason itself. In claiming cultural oppression, conservatives hold themselves out as the counter-culture to the dominant liberal culture, the last holdouts of resistance against the false consciousness of left-liberal hegemony.

This is the nature of conservatives’ cultural oppression—or perceived cultural oppression—and I have written this book in the conviction that we cannot truly comprehend the passions that drive America’s politics without first comprehending those passions’ wellsprings in this sense of oppression and, just as importantly, in liberals’ perennial incredulity before this sense of oppression, which they reflexively dismiss as an irrational distraction from the “real issues.” Conservative claims of cultural oppression are not always labeled as such. But this clash of sensibilities and worldviews is always lurking there as the quiet yet all-important background of all the ostensibly narrower disagreements, imbuing these with a special symbolic resonance that is always amplifying the stakes and intensifying the conflict. And yet the origins and meaning of that special resonance have not received the intellectual attention they are due.

The conventional wisdom of liberals is that conservatism thrives on vague cultural resentments that duplicitously channel essentially economic grievances into symbolic obsessions with the depredations of an imaginary liberal elite, whose haughty pretentiousness is speciously contrasted with the basic goodness and authenticity of the conservative ordinary American, the much beleaguered salt of the earth. In this way do conservative propagandists divert the attention of these ordinary Americans away from the transgressions of their real ruling class, the business elite, who know how to harness social conservatism toward their own advantage. Liberals believe this diagnosis is amply supported by the historical record, by the story of the modern conservative movement, and by common sense about the average American's real interests. The hypocrisy and opportunism of conservative leaders seem like prime evidence for the contrived nature of cultural wars rhetoric as the cheapest form of identity politics, a new opiate of the masses to which a sizable segment of the American electorate is now addicted.

But perhaps this received wisdom oversimplifies and leaves out something crucial, something that once recognized would place conservatives' cultural grievances in a new light that problematizes the conventional liberal diagnosis. As compelling as this diagnosis may appear in "sophisticated" circles, this very sophistication has yet to be scrutinized philosophically. And this is precisely what I endeavor to do in these pages, by examining the philosophical assumptions about human nature and history that have been built into conservative claims of cultural oppression and, correlatively, the assumptions that have been built into liberals' perennial incredulity toward these claims. What is being presupposed in the position that these are disingenuous? And what would have to be true for them to qualify as "sincere"? As we noted, conservatives see resistance and dissidence where liberals see rancor and nihilism. Is there a truth of the matter here, or are these incommensurable perspectives that cannot be adjudicated rationally? And is this in fact a clash of "perspectives," or is it most fundamentally a conflict between different ways of being human? These are only a few of the many questions raised by conservative claims of cultural oppression.

Kotkin maintains that the progressive Clerisy "operates on very different principles than its rival power brokers" because it wields, not economic power, but the power to regulate, instruct, and persuade. And the liberal instinct is to dismiss this second form of power as somehow less real, as "merely symbolic," by comparison with the more "tangible" power wielded by conservative financial interests. But perhaps this seemingly "hard-nosed" conception of power serves as an ideology that endows liberal power with the very plausible deniability that aggrieves conservatives. The old French First estate was not impotent merely because it lacked the "tangible" power of the sword, for it exercised influence in many other ways that were not the less real for being indirect or diffuse. What are the philosophical grounds for

dichotomizing between merely symbolic grievances and substantive self-interest, and what becomes of the liberal self-understanding once this dichotomy collapses? The upshot might be to blur any clear-cut distinctions between Left and Right and provide conservatives' particular brand of class struggle with a new plausibility. Perhaps the boundary line between Left and Right is on some level indeterminate. Perhaps liberalism produces its own conservatism just as conservatism produces its own liberalism. Liberals may dismiss conservative claims of cultural oppression as histrionics and contrivance. But as we will see again and again in multifarious contexts, these claims raise questions that are profoundly philosophical, with implications that go to the heart of what it is to be human.

Having dismissed conservative claims of cultural oppression as histrionics and contrivance, liberals also dismiss the conservative appropriation of liberalism as just the politically opportunistic swiping of progressive lingo. But our question here is whether this appropriation admits of an intellectually serious defense once suitably refined and reformulated, whether conservative claims of cultural oppression are broadcasting some "larger truth" that survives all the usual liberal arguments. Conservative depictions of liberalism's transgressions strike liberals as downright hallucinatory. But as we already noted, "liberalism" seems to carry broader connotations for conservatives than for liberals. This raises the possibility that the liberal self-understanding is in some way *under-descriptive* and that conservatives' cultural grievances harbor the seeds of a thicker, more penetrating description.

If liberals cannot be brought to acknowledge these grievances, this could be because their very identities inure them to that to which the grievances are *reactions*. It is a perennial theme of the Left that oppressed groups can perceive iniquities that dominant groups are disposed to overlook. And so the intellectually consistent liberal must ask whether the relationship between liberals and conservatives in America today could be yet another instance of this phenomenon, must ask whether liberals have transgressed against conservatives in ways that their very "liberalism" will not allow them to recognize. Liberals may dismiss conservative claims of cultural oppression as empty posturing, but is it not to be expected that a ruling class will thus dismiss the outcries of an oppressed group? Liberals' bemused incredulity toward conservative grievances may itself be a natural byproduct of the very oppression being alleged, because the dominant culture's language and concepts will always privilege the perspectives of its ruling elites, who shape the "common sense" to which oppressed groups are made to answer. The critical theorists of the Left have long made such arguments on behalf of racial minorities, women, and gays. Our question is whether they can also be made on behalf of conservatives.

These are the perplexities to which this book is devoted. The purpose of Part I, Chapters 1-3, is to outline the general worldview of conservative claims of cultural oppression. While their basic features are by now familiar to most Americans, I work to dissolve this easy familiarity and unearth these claims' philosophical dimensions. Chapter 1 seeks to achieve a clear view of the field: What exactly defines a conservative claim cultural oppression and what distinguishes such claims from other expressions of conservatism? I argue that conservative claims of cultural oppression are what must become of conservatism once it absorbs the moral and intellectual reflexes of the Left into itself, and that this absorption has fundamentally altered the nature of conservatism, imbuing it with a new spirit that defies old stereotypes.

Chapter 2 then proceeds to examine these claims' recurring themes—including conservatives' understanding of modern American history, their sense of liberalism as covertly "elitist," and their sense of themselves as outsiders who have torn away liberalism's veil of illusion and now speak truth to a power that refuses to acknowledge its own existence. Conservative claimants of cultural oppression are persuaded that liberalism is surreptitiously "moralistic" notwithstanding its pretensions to cosmopolitan sophistication, that many "ordinary Americans" have unwittingly internalized the liberal dispensation in contravention of their authentic natures as conservatives, and that liberal intellectualism is a fraudulent pseudo-intellectualism, merely a social performance by means of which liberals appropriate undeserved cultural capital. We will seek to understand just why conservatives hold these beliefs, in the process separating their wheat from their chaff. Connolly holds that these beliefs are united by rancor and nihilism, but I will be examining their *conceptual* affinities and the ways in which they mirror the countercultural impulses of the Left.

Chapter 3 continues the discussion of Chapter 2 but with a specific focus on conservatives' sense that liberals have projected all their own moral and intellectual failings onto them. Where liberals condemn conservatives as the unfortunate relics of a benighted past, conservatives respond that liberals are the true atavisms—crypto-fascists, crypto-racists, crypto-aristocrats, crypto-imperialists, crypto-theocrats, and indeed crypto-conservatives. In all these cases as in countless others, a stereotype that has been historically pinned on conservatives is reformulated so as to be "thrown back" at liberals. Conservatives confront what they believe is an iniquitous social hierarchy that always credits liberals with reflectiveness, discernment, and empathy while branding them as smug, mean-spirited, and authoritarian. Overthrowing this hierarchy means exposing liberals as the greatest violators of their own highest ideals, pretenders and usurpers who may be condemned on their own terms.

With this groundwork laid, Part Two, Chapters 4-6, proceeds to introduce a theory of conservatives' cultural oppression, to unearth the philosophical understandings of human nature and history that would provide their grievances with a new intelligibility. This, I argue, requires conceptualizing liberalism and conservatism, not just as competing sets of ideas, but also as competing forms of *consciousness*. For it is this latter competition that explains both conservatives' sense of cultural oppression and why the nature of that oppression has proven so difficult to clarify. But clarify is precisely what I endeavor to do.

Chapter 4 argues that, with the liberal consciousness having been more extensively "modernized," liberals are positioned to *sublimate, intellectualize, and etherealize* their illiberal or moralistic impulses—and thus disguise them from view. As relative "pre-moderns," however, conservatives are not so privileged, and so their illiberalism is more readily discernible to the naked eye. This is the root of their cultural oppression because it is this advantage that allows liberals to project their own authoritarianism onto conservatives and invoke the power of the state and other institutions to undermine *other people's* illiberal hierarchies while their own such hierarchies remain shielded from analogous forms of criticism, regulation, and interference. What liberals hold out as their superior virtue is underwritten by this liberal privilege.

The liberal elites believe they stand above a retrograde conservatism because they believe their Enlightenment ideals have liberated them from the various "hero-systems" to which conservatives remain beholden. Hero-systems are social teleologies, systems of collective meaning-production, and liberals see conservatism as sustained by an atavistic attraction to these relics of a benighted pre-modernity. But the conservative suspicion is that liberalism is a hero-system in disguise, a hero-system that stays concealed behind a secular façade of enlightenment, pragmatism, and utilitarianism. While liberals may wish to see themselves as committed solely to ordinary human fulfillment shorn of any higher metaphysical aspirations, conservatives perceive that liberalism is unbeknownst to itself driven by a religious impulse and spiritual ideal that play themselves out through the medium of ostensibly secular goals. Liberalism is a hero-system that disguises itself as the transcendence of all hero-systems.

This contemporary truth, I argue, is the legacy of modernity's forgotten origins. If conservatives refuse to accept liberalism at face value, this is because they are viscerally attuned to its actual historical underpinnings. These consist, not in Enlightenment pure and simple, but in the secularization of the religious asceticism that laid the foundations of the modern world. This is why "progressive Clerisy" is in fact an apt label for the liberal elites, who embody impulses that first germinated in the West's pre-liberal past. The aspiration to "rise above" the merely human was once conceived in expressly theological terms,

as fealty to the City of God over the City of Man. Today, this aspiration has become secularized and transpires politically and culturally as the imperative to rise above conservatism toward liberalism, which affords its adherents a special feeling of spiritual purity that stands exalted above the fallen realm of conservatism. Thus seen, conservatism is not a competing philosophy to be refuted but an ingrained sinfulness to be exposed and disciplined away. Yet this layer of social meaning is precisely what gets obscured by the Enlightenment narratives that guarantee liberalism's cultural dominance.

The result is the fundamental inequality that aggrieves conservatives. Whereas the hero-systems of the Right—e.g., “God, Country, and Family”—must operate in full public view, the hero-systems of the Left can operate surreptitiously within insulated institutional enclaves whose specialized discourses provide them with a pragmatic veneer. This is what distinguishes the power of the Clerisy from that of its “rival power brokers,” who do not enjoy the benefit of this plausible deniability. Hence the proliferation of conservative laments about the cultural decadence of various liberal elite enclaves, like academia, the media, Hollywood, and so forth, which are understood to be perpetuating this inequality and deception. It is these enclaves and the prestige they exude that allow liberals to imagine that they have transcended the primitive, often unconscious identity-affirmation needs of conservatives in favor of a new rational autonomy that can dispense with these. But this self-image is only a liberal privilege and not a bona fide liberal achievement. Liberals have not repudiated illiberal sectarianism as such, but merely invested their sectarianism elsewhere than, say, the traditional family or patriotic nationalism. The liberal elites have simply “privatized” their conservatism in various professional and cultural milieus, where they can indulge the same all-too-human impulses that the conservative ordinary American must display more openly. Exercising far more control over their cultural environments, the liberal elites are privileged to insulate themselves from whatever might threaten their own identities and thereby *provoke* their intolerance. That is why they can see themselves as more tolerant, more “open” than conservatives, whose identities are more exposed to social disconfirmation.

Liberals can overlook this inequality because their Enlightenment-centric conception of history causes them to conceive of their liberalism as what naturally ensues from discarding the illusions and confining horizons of a benighted teleological past of which conservatism is the regrettable contemporary residue. But Chapters 5 and 6 introduce an alternative paradigm of modernity that undermines this self-image and gives credence to conservatives' conviction that liberalism is a surreptitiously sectarian ethos whose “organizing principle is control.”

Liberals see modernity as separated from pre-modernity by differential enlightenment, but they can also be viewed as separated by differential “civilization.” Seen in this light, pre-modern Europeans

were defined, not only by their ignorance and superstition, but just as crucially by a personality structure much more given to the merely “animal” in human nature, to a kind of spontaneity and oscillation that would be considered abnormal today, a personality capable of experiencing the sacred and being invaded by spirit forces. Pre-moderns were not only ignorant but *unruly*, without the panoply of inhibitions now associated with normal adulthood and lacking our clear sense of the boundaries between inner and outer and between mind and body. Our enlightened modernity first developed, not because science successfully refuted theology, but because a new coalition of religious and secular elites collaborated to impose new disciplines and repressions on human nature in an attempt to uproot this pre-modern default consciousness and train the productive, sober-minded citizenry presupposed by a modern social order.

These disciplines and repressions have been culturally exalted as the achievement of a historically unprecedented self-possession, self-control, and self-transparency, the liberation of essential human faculties from the teleological illusions in which a benighted past once shackled them. But this self-congratulatory Enlightenment narrative conceals a darker and more complicated story that reveals molding and coercion where liberalism sees only liberation and “awareness.” What liberalism upholds as autonomous self-possession is in fact the internalization of the new restraints and inhibitions of the disciplinary society. The modern liberal identity is not an unvarnished naturalistic lucidity, as liberals are wont to see it. For it embodies the contingent historical forces that first generated it, a new uniformization, homogenization, and rationalization that liberalism’s Enlightenment narratives conceal or discount. These narratives trace our modern “innerness” to a certain psychic liberation from mindless convention. But they overlook that this innerness is a kind of mindless convention in its own right, the outcome of the disciplinary molding that quietly undergirds the liberal dispensation.

Conservatives are intuiting precisely this molding when they claim cultural oppression. Hence their powerful sense that there is something unnatural or inauthentic about liberalism. This conviction may not always be communicated persuasively, but it nonetheless tracks the historical process by which the modern liberal identity was actually shaped. Today’s “cultural wars,” I argue, are most profoundly viewed as a *contemporary recapitulation* of the struggles by which the modern first emerged out of the pre-modern, a clash between elites trying to inculcate the disciplines and repressions of the modern identity and the unwashed masses trying to resist this extirpation of their traditional, often disordered folkways—a role now filled by “traditional American values.” If conservatives can feel culturally oppressed by power-hungry, control-obsessed liberals where the latter see only right-wing rhetoric, the reason is that, having less fully internalized the modern ideal of the self, conservatives are more viscerally attuned to its cultural contingency and more averse to the particular forms of disciplined, disengaged agency into

which liberals have been more successfully socialized. Contemporary liberalism represents the apex of the disciplinary impulses that spawned modernity. It is the latest and most extreme outgrowth of the secularization of religious asceticism and the democratization of courtly sociability, the now forgotten pre-Enlightenment roots of progressive sensibilities. What liberals celebrate as their superior “civility” is a modernized and politicized variant of these supposedly superseded impulses. And it is these impulses that fuel liberals’ reflexive aversion to conservatism as a kind of rude and crude animality, a sinful indiscipline and affront to the higher refinement of liberal sensibilities.

This is what conservatives ultimately mean by “political correctness.” For this by now subterranean historical legacy is what gives liberalism a thicker cultural meaning than can be acknowledged by the liberal elites. The latter’s Enlightenment-centric self-understanding conceals this thickness, conceals that liberalism is not only a set of principles but also a form of *training*, which is precisely what oppresses conservatives. Politically incorrect gun enthusiasts are the “most intensely detested” of liberalism’s many enemies, as *National Review* notes, because they refuse this training, with the result that they now serve liberals as premier social symbols for the unhinged impulsivity and potential violence of the undisciplined, pre-modern self lacking the disengaged self-control and self-possession of the modern liberal identity. Having defined themselves in opposition to this barbaric past, liberals must shame and stigmatize all who would remind them of it. Conservatism and conservatives are replete with such reminders, which must therefore be extirpated.

Such is the origin of “conservaphobia” and the insight that unravels the mystery of conservative claims of cultural oppression. Conservatives may hold themselves out as civilization’s defenders—“placid, compliant, and respectful toward others” as Groves says—but they are actually civilization’s *discontents*. And liberals cannot tolerate this discontent, which is the ultimate target of their moral indignation. This relationship is the reason why liberalism produces its own conservatism just as conservatism produces its own liberalism. Liberals’ position at the vanguard of the modern West’s “civilizing” process necessarily thrusts them into the role of disciplinarians, in reaction to which conservatives have cultivated their own special kind of emancipationist ethos. Conservatives could have absorbed the moral and intellectual reflexes of the Left, developing a post-modernism and multiculturalism of the Right, because they are the targets of the same “civilizing” norms which the Left protests have been imperiously foisted upon non-Western peoples by a condescending European colonialism. Hence the “very focused form of snobbery” which the *National Review* discerns in the Left and its kulturkampf against gun enthusiasts. This is no empty ad hominem, but a reminder of liberalism’s historical origins in the now forgotten wellsprings of modernity, which was born of elitist impulses.

If conservatives dismiss liberalism's universalism, tolerance, and reflectiveness as sophisticated ruses, this is by virtue of their intuitive sense that these high ideals are underpinned by a disciplinary ethos, by a historically constructed way of being that now masquerades as timeless human nature. This false consciousness is why liberalism could have become normalized as a reassuring sign of mental health while conservatism has been pathologized as a kind of disorder or malfunction. Conservatives can feel themselves reduced to second-class citizens perennially disdained by a haughty coterie of "elites" because the elitism in question consists of the secularized asceticism of the modern liberal identity, one of whose features is a certain visceral contempt for those who have failed to properly internalize it. Liberalism is covertly illiberal because it can flourish only inasmuch as it is prepared to coerce its particular brand of self-discipline and self-control upon the unwilling, whose suffering and alienation in the face of this undeclared agenda never enters liberalism's moral calculus.

Despite their official egalitarianism, liberals believe in their heart of hearts that they enjoy a more self-regulating and self-transparent form of human agency than has been attained by conservatives, the "bitter clingers" lost in a hallucinatory world of imaginary cultural villains. But the counter-enlightenment history I defend reveals that what liberals celebrate as their higher-order rationality is in its subterranean structure a system of collective meaning-production, a hero-system that as such is no less parochial and heteronomous than the hero-systems of conservatism. There can be an "evangelical-capitalist resonance machine" giving vent to a resentment-based spirituality because conservatives are reacting to *another* resonance machine that is now too internalized and institutionalized to be recognized as such, *another* form of spirituality that aims to extirpate human potentialities that are incompatible with its view of proper human normalcy. This is why conservatives can see themselves as resisting a false consciousness-breeding liberal hegemon and why they treat what seem like analytically separate issues as interrelated at some deeper level as varied expressions of this hegemon. If an evangelical-capitalist resonance machine could have succeeded in uniting a wide range of facially incongruous ideologies into a movement that is larger than the sum of its parts, this is because these ideologies cohere as varied forms of protest against liberalism's "civilizing" agenda.

Naturally, liberals will deny that they are elites given to intolerance and bullying. But they can do so only because drives that were once acknowledged openly by earlier generations of modern elites have since receded into the invisible, taken-for-granted background of things, covered over by a veneer of pragmatism, therapy, and moral common sense—e.g., fears about mass shootings. But underneath this veneer, gun violence and other "policy problems" are being employed as occasions to promote a thicker social morality than liberals will acknowledge, to promote the disciplinary ethos that conservatives

confront on an intuitive, visceral level that defies easy articulation. The resulting inarticulacy is what allows liberals to remain perennially insensible to the deeper truth of conservatives' cultural grievances, which conservatives must always struggle to convey. Conservative polemics against political correctness may rest on exaggeration and distortion. But the exaggeration and distortion form part of an attempt to symbolically encapsulate the exceedingly subtle forms of illiberalism at play within this subterranean layer of human experience, for which we lack an adequate vocabulary. Hence what many conservatives acknowledge as their perennial rhetorical disadvantages vis-à-vis liberalism.

Part Three, Chapters 7-9, extends the theory introduced in Part Two, elaborating on its implications for a range of questions and controversies. Chapter 7 argues that liberals can believe that the conservative appropriation of liberalism rests on patently false equivalencies only because they refuse to take their naturalism to its logical conclusion, to where conservatives' cultural grievances can be seen as "tangible," at which point the equivalencies begin to make sense. If liberals dismiss these grievances as merely "symbolic" or "psychological," this is because they have notwithstanding their professed secularism retained important vestiges of a Christian past, like belief in mind-body dualism and free will, that obstruct a more fully naturalistic, physiologically embedded understanding of human beings and their political ideologies.

Understood on this level, as a way of *being*, conservative claims of cultural oppression are not just an assortment of irritable gripes about the world—the standard liberal diagnosis—but a physiological and existential revolt against the disciplines and repressions of the modern, liberal order, to which some are less adapted than others. These disciplines and repressions are what explain conservatives' powerful sense that liberals are engaged in an "assault" against their values, for this is precisely what is transpiring on the synaptic, neurological level of human functioning that is elided by liberals' seemingly hard-nosed utilitarianism. The violence done here remains "real" irrespective of whose arguments on abortion or school prayer are ultimately more cogent, because the arguments are always secondary to this more primordial layer of human conflict, which is where conservatives' cultural dispossession is taking place. This is what intellectually sophisticated liberals typically fail to recognize, and as a consequence of their very sophistication and rationalism.

Here is the "larger truth" at which conservative claims of cultural oppression are always intimating. Liberals may be the ones who most ardently celebrate science and naturalism, but it is conservatives who are the more viscerally naturalistic at the primordial level of embodied human experience, where the dualisms by which liberals would distinguish their principled high-mindedness from conservatives' hidebound prejudice and egoism become untenable. What liberals dismiss as the

politically opportunistic swiping of progressive lingo reflects conservatives' more naturalistic, less rationalistic perceptions of human beings in general and liberals in particular, their profound sense that liberalism's official rational morality grows out of a pre-rational identity that is always being imposed alongside what purports to be moral idealism pure and simple. Liberals cannot see the broader context of their idealism because their antiquated Enlightenment view of reason as predominantly conscious and disembodied leaves them insensible to this layer of human experience, and so overconfident of their ability to recognize oppression and inequality. The conscious categories through which they would distinguish their own cosmopolitan idealism from the narrowness and parochialism of conservatives can capture only a fraction of what transpires at the deeper level of our unconscious functioning, in the merely animal of human nature, where liberalism's neutral abstractions lose all meaning. This is what the symbolic grievances are ultimately symbolic *of*.

Chapter 8 further fleshes out the implications of my theory through a series of case studies examining issues like gay rights, feminism, distributive justice, criminal responsibility, racism, and the therapeutic tendencies of progressive education. In all these cases, we can observe that liberals promote an unspoken hierarchy between those who have internalized the disciplines of liberalism and those who stubbornly refuse them. With conservatives having been judged lacking in the higher civilization and consciousness of liberalism, they naturally become targeted for its particular brand of stigmatization—which is being effectuated *through* “the issues,” right alongside, and as an integral component of, liberal idealism. Liberals may not dehumanize their enemies as crudely as do some advocates of “traditional values,” but they engage in subtler forms of dehumanization under the cover of plausible deniability. Whatever the issue, liberalism's ostensible commitment to neutral abstractions like openness and critical thinking conceals a thicker social morality. And this morality demands that liberalism's opponents be branded as bereft of “awareness,” mired in a barbarian past of rude and crude folkways, and thus given to forms of social oppression and blindness that it is liberals' responsibility to uproot. Since these claims to superior awareness can only be vindicated socially by discovering novel forms of oppression and blindness to replace those which have recently been eliminated, liberalism's definition of what genuine freedom, dignity, and equality require of us is propelled by the force of its own inner logic to become further and further removed from conventional understandings of these principles. It is this ever-widening chasm that fuels what we have come to call the “culture wars.”

Chapter 9 narrows the focus to the problem of religious neutrality and investigates conservatives' conviction that what liberalism advertises as its religious neutrality disguises the machinations of a secular counter-religion. Conservatives believe that what passes for religious neutrality is no high ideal, but an

ideological tool in the service of secularist hegemony, and hence liberal domination. Here as elsewhere, conservative claims of cultural oppression invite liberal incredulity. Here as elsewhere, that incredulity is dissolved by the counter-enlightenment narrative I defend. Liberals will dismiss worries about the encroachments of a religion of secularism or “secular humanism” as cynical and disingenuous. But they can do so only because their Enlightenment self-understanding overlooks the ways in which certain vestiges of a religious past have been incorporated into our putatively secular norms and ideals, whose *religious* function is to exalt their defenders as persons purified of the superstition, paganism, and idolatry of religious conservatives.

In so exalting themselves, liberals surreptitiously promote a new variant of the very religiosity they purport to repudiate. I argue that the relationship between religious conservatives and secular liberals is most profoundly conceived as a contemporary recapitulation of the relationship between conquered pagans and conquering Christians trying to uproot these pagans’ idolatry. What liberals call religious neutrality is an intellectualized, sublimated, and secularized iteration of this ancient ambition, which now operates within unacknowledged layers of social meaning rather than through formal creeds. This plausible deniability is why conservative anxieties about the encroachments of an aggressive, evangelizing secular humanism *sound* paranoid and conspiratorial. But like all conservative claims of cultural oppression, these worries become intelligible once placed in their broader historical and philosophical context, which always reveals the larger truth of what strikes liberals as conservative obtuseness. And this is that our disagreements about the meaning of religious neutrality are the secularization of what first arose as religious disagreements concerning the relative transcendence or immanence of the divine. The religious neutrality problem is the sedimentation of the theological past in the jurisprudential present, the surreptitious replaying of a conflict between different kinds of religious believers as a conflict about what qualifies as neutrality between believer and non-believer. It is this historical legacy, and not conservative obstinacy, that explains why this conflict has proven so divisive and intractable.

PART ONE

THE NARRATIVE

Chapter One

Introduction

1. The Left is the Right and the Right is the Left

The time was a few weeks before the 2008 election and the place was MSNBC's *Morning Joe*. Under discussion was the increasingly unhinged racism and xenophobia that seemed to be gripping crowds at McCain-Palin rallies, where some attendees, apparently driven batty by the prospect of an African-American president, reacted with shouts of "terrorist" and "kill him" at the mere mention of Barack Obama's name. The show's mild-mannered conservative host, former GOP congressman Joe Scarborough, responded that these outbursts were surely beyond the pale. But he then seized upon these reports as an occasion to remind liberals that that they should also pay attention to their own incivility problems and stop judging conservatives by a double-standard, as though they were the only ones capable of lapsing into incivility. When a few misfits behave outrageously at Republican campaign events, this is taken by liberals as evidence for the latent racism and general depravity of conservatives. But no objections are raised when a well-respected liberal commentator like Thomas Frank writes *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, a book that took aim, not at one man, but at an *entire state*, dismissing its conservative-voting citizens as a bunch of "yahoos," Scarborough observed. A conservative like him was willing to turn around and criticize his own when they crossed the line. Yet liberals seem unwilling to engage in similar self-policing, unwilling to acknowledge, let alone denounce, the hatred and bigotry that grows in their own ranks.

In a book in which liberals took much delight, Frank argued that his fellow Kansans had been duped into voting against their own economic interests—that is, into voting Republican—by cynical politicians and intellectuals of the right. These operatives have succeeded in transmuting economic frustrations into cultural resentment against a fictional "liberal elite," inciting an irrational cultural class war against these elites to displace the rational economic class war against the powerful business interests that these Kansans should fight and once did fight. Whereas the working Kansans of yesteryear were fiery progressives resisting economic exploitation by plutocrats,¹ Kansas had recently become a place where the working class was more conservative than its economic overlords,² driven on by a crusade that

¹ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2005), pg. 15.

² *Ibid*, pg. 106.

suspends material interests in favor of vague, unappeasable cultural grievances.³ The “in many ways...preeminent question of our time,” Frank observed, was how so many people could get their fundamental interests so wrong, how so many people could fail to recognize that “it is the Democrats that are the party of the workers, of the poor, of the weak and the victimized.” This was once “part of the ABCs of adulthood.”⁴ Yet conservatives have now obscured those ABCs by replacing a hard-nosed economic conception of class with an airy cultural one. Class oppression is now understood to be the result, not of the unprecedented concentration of economic power in the hands of business elites, but of the unprecedented concentration of cultural power in a haughty intelligentsia. It is a perennial struggle between the unpretentious, authentic majority and an egg-headed yet all-powerful elite contemptuous of this majority’s tastes and values.⁵ Kansans’ measurable economic powerlessness vis-à-vis real plutocratic overlords had been reinterpreted as a vague sense of cultural disenfranchisement by liberalism, which conservatives now condemn as an alien, menacing sensibility that any authentic American rejects instinctively.

By thus reconfiguring the meaning of class and class conflict, conservatives have arrogated to themselves the mantle of the outsider and underdog. Frank observed:

From the mild-mannered David Brooks to the ever-wrathful Ann Coulter, attacks on the personal tastes and pretensions of this [the liberal] stratum of society are the stock-in-trade of conservative writers. They, the conservatives, are the real outsiders, they tell us, gazing with disgust upon the ludicrous manners of the high and mighty. Or, they tell us, they are rough-and-ready proles, laughing along with us at the efforts of our social “betters” to reform and improve us. That they are often, in fact, people of privilege doing their utmost to boost the fortunes of a political party that is the traditional tool of the privileged is a contradiction that does not trouble them.⁶

No longer defined in traditional terms—as a matter of money, birth, or occupation—class has been reconceptualized as a matter of authenticity as measured by consumer preferences, recreational predilections, and religious affiliation.⁷ Conservatives’ “dearest rhetorical maneuver,” observed Frank, was the “latte liberal,” the idea “that liberals are identifiable by their tastes and consumer preferences and that these tastes and preferences reveal the essential arrogance and foreignness of liberalism.”⁸ In contrast to the effete pretentiousness and snobbery of liberalism, the conservative denizens of red-state America are promoted as sincere, down-to-earth, reverent, and “attuned to the rhythms of the universe.”⁹

³ Ibid., pg. 121.

⁴ Ibid., pg. 1.

⁵ Ibid., pg. 13.

⁶ Ibid. pg. 116.

⁷ Ibid., pg. 113.

⁸ Ibid. pg. 16.

⁹ Ibid. pg. 28.

Fixating upon the personal tastes and pretensions of liberals, conservatives have cast liberalism, not as a political creed that speaks to the needs of the many, but as a lifestyle choice that appeals to the tastes of the few. Regular Americans are oppressed, not by polluters sullyng their air and water, but by the “earnest young vegans of Washington, D.C., two years out of Brown and already lording over the hardworking people of the vest interior from a desk at the EPA.”¹⁰ Conservatives had persuaded Kansans that government regulations should be assessed, not according to the concrete interests they advance, but according to the cultural pretensions they channel. The preference for environmental regulation over environmental degradation is now placed in the same category as the preference for veganism over meat, or café latte over black coffee—just another manifestation of an imperious liberalism tightening its tentacles at every opportunity.

Scarborough, however, seemed to be of the view that Frank’s argument was more akin to racial hostility and xenophobia than to legitimate social commentary. His thesis wasn’t just mistaken, but also an act of aggression that was on some level morally analogous to racist outbursts at Republican rallies. Unwilling to recognize Frank’s thesis as disinterested sociological reflection, Scarborough condemned it as one more elitist gesture, yet another act of collective defamation by a liberal trying to reform his social inferiors. Far from discrediting the cultural grievances it examined, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* only provided a further illustration of their justice. Is respecting those with different views not, Scarborough may have been thinking, also among the “ABCs of adulthood”? Heartfelt disagreement notwithstanding, is it not incumbent upon us to accept others’ opinions at “face values”—rather than dismissing them as epiphenomena of forces that we alone we have the sagacity to discern, as Frank seemed to be doing? The “preeminent question of our time,” then, isn’t why so many voters attach such importance to vague cultural grievances, but why conservatives are routinely held accountable for the slightest modicum of real or perceived bigotry while liberals can casually indulge their own bigotry in plain view without fear of reproach.

Scarborough’s comparison will strike liberals as strange indeed. How, they will object, could the very thinly veiled racism displayed at Republican rallies possibly be compared with Frank’s attempt to make sense of a historically unprecedented shift in voting behavior? However, Scarborough would retort that the perceived unfairness of the comparison only testifies to the dominance of the liberal culture, which has rigged the rules of civility against conservatives. Are hatred and incivility not evenly distributed across the political spectrum, he might have asked. The mechanisms of incivility may vary. For a certain

¹⁰ Ibid. pg. 116.

breed of conservative, the mechanism is crude epithets. For a liberal commentator like Frank, it is an eloquent essay. But nothing could be more elitist than to imagine that superior eloquence is a substitute for the ABCs of adulthood. Whether one calls someone who is plainly not a terrorist a terrorist or attributes his views on abortion to the political manipulation of economic frustration, the upshot is the same, which is to exclude him from the equal respect due our fellow citizens. Is this just another vague cultural grievance, or something which liberals unequivocally condemn in every case but that of conservatives?

Scarborough is scarcely alone in suggesting that liberals mistreat conservatives in a fashion resembling the ways in which privileged, dominant majorities have mistreated and marginalized minorities, and that liberals therefore occupy a position akin to the one they customarily ascribe to conservatives—callous overlords always aggrandizing themselves at the expense of the powerless. The comparison appears again in *National Review*'s Jonah Goldberg's critique of liberals' morally and intellectually suspect enthusiasm for scientific research into the biological substratum of political ideology. The "always new science of conservative phrenology," writes Goldberg, is a "white-smocked effort to explain away conservatism as a mental defect, genetic abnormality, or curable pathology."¹¹ Liberals routinely excoriate as beyond the pale any and all speculation into the genetic basis and heritability of intelligence whenever race or gender are in the mix. But then they are astonishingly hypocritical in their "gidd[iness] to entertain the notion that conservatives have broken brains—based solely on the fact that they are conservatives."¹² Whether their analytical framework is sociological, as for Frank, or biological, as for the phrenologists of conservatism, liberals seem united in their determination to denigrate conservatives by any means necessary.

Goldberg believes this impulse was illustrated in Satoshi Kanazawa's argument in *Psychology Today* that liberalism represents a genetically novel dispensation. Our evolutionary history in close-knit tribal societies naturally disposes us to restrict altruism to kin. But liberalism, in its willingness to devote large proportions of private resources for the benefit of genetically unrelated others, represents the transcendence of our merely natural state, a freedom from the rigorous genetic logic that binds other animals. And this, argues Kanazawa, is the reason why liberals are *smarter* than conservatives, the reason why "apart from a few areas in life (such as business) where countervailing circumstances may prevail, *liberals control all institutions*." Being "on average more intelligent than conservatives," liberals are more

¹¹ Jonah Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas* (Sentinel 2012), pg. 207.

¹²Ibid., pg. 218.

likely to attain “the highest status in any area of (evolutionarily novel) modern life.”¹³ But the Achilles Heel of this argument, retorts Goldberg, resides in the exceptions it concedes. If conservatives are successful in business, the reason is that business, just like the military, law enforcement, engineering, and the hard sciences, does not create institutional ideological filters to screen out conservatives. The bottom line in business is the bottom line, profit, rather than “an affinity for social engineering, liberal group think, or progressive do-goodery.” This is why conservatives can thrive in these fields as they cannot in liberal-dominated milieus. In short, Kanawaza’s genetic argument is only plausible if we first discount the obvious cultural, historical, and sociological explanations for discrepancies in liberal and conservative performance in fields like academia, entertainment, and publishing. Anyone who knows how these institutions actually work knows that their gatekeepers “aren’t simply keeping stupid conservatives out; they’re keeping conservatives out, period.”¹⁴

In an odd sort of way, Goldberg’s disagreement with Kanazawa mirrors the well-known historical dispute between white supremacists and their egalitarian adversaries. After all, the liberal here is attempting to defend an unequal status quo as the natural expression of biologically immutable differences. By contrast, the conservative is decrying this explanation as self-serving ideology, issuing claims of pervasive prejudice and discrimination, and highlighting the need for egalitarian change. Whereas Kanazawa suggests that liberals are a “master race” of sorts, Goldberg retorts that this is a social illusion generated by unequal power relations.

We can imagine this debate continuing along the same tracks already laid down by the debate about race. The gatekeepers of academia, publishing, Hollywood, and other bastions of liberalism believe they are judging merit. But so too have many whites at the very instant they were unconsciously discriminating against blacks. Critical race theorists have long held that prevailing measures of merit are just reflections of white supremacy. Alex M. Johnson argues that the idea of merit serves white people’s “need to believe that their social positions are the result of something more than the brute fact of social power and racial domination.”¹⁵ And this is also Goldberg’s response to Kanazawa and like-minded liberals. Liberal merit is merely an instrument of liberal domination, an ideal that has been fine-tuned to exclude conservative individuals and suppress conservative achievement. If one reason for the shortage of black academics is, as Henry Louis Gates argues, that white people have not been trained to recognize

¹³ Ibid. pg. 216.

¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 216.

¹⁵ Alex M. Johnson, *Bid Whist, Tonk and United States v. Fordice: Why Integrationism Fails African-Americans Again*, 81 Cal. L. Rev. 1401. 1424

black intelligence,¹⁶ then is it not also possible that liberals have not been trained to recognize conservative intelligence or, worse, have been trained to not recognize it?

Explaining the tenets of black nationalism, critical race theorist Gary Peller argues that liberal integrationism is premised on the mistaken assumption that the “category of merit itself is neutral, impersonal, and somehow developed outside the economy of social power, with its significant currency of race, class, and gender, that marks American social life.”¹⁷ But Goldberg is suggesting that liberalism has its own “economy of social power” and that it is only by ignoring this background that liberals can bask in their imagined intellectual superiority. Liberals will argue that conservatives are underrepresented in academia because they are temperamentally drawn to other professions. But might this be because conservative students lack proper role models, because they were from the beginning dismissed by their liberal professors as hopeless cretins, and so were never placed in a position to develop the talents that would deprive Kanawaza of the evidence for his liberal master race? If racism can generate its own social truth by creating conditions under which oppressed races are forced to conform to racial prejudices, then perhaps liberalism too produces its own self-fulfilling prophecies, *creating* what it subsequently casts as the natural inequality of liberals and conservatives. Liberals may not see their intellectual standards as politically motivated. But Barbara J. Flagg observes that “[b]ecause whites do not conceive of themselves as a distinctive racial group, their ‘consciousness’ of whiteness is predominantly unconsciousness of whiteness.”¹⁸ Perhaps liberals suffer from an analogous blindness when they fail to recognize themselves as a distinct class with distinct values, tastes, and interests, the silent background of their anti-conservative biases.

To be sure, some liberals will reject Kanawaza’s argument. But as critical race theorists have tirelessly emphasized, whites can be racist without formally embracing the tenets of white supremacy. For every white person who actually does so, there are countless others who unconsciously live out those tenets in their immediate nervous reflexes, in what Charles Lawrence calls racially-based “selective sympathy or indifference.”¹⁹ Something similar may hold true of liberals. They may not all subscribe to, or even be acquainted with, the “ever new science of conservative phrenology.” But this does not

¹⁶ Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pg. 171.

¹⁷ Gary Peller, *Race Consciousness*, 1990 Duke L.J. 758, 776-77 (1990)

¹⁸ Barbara J. Flagg, *Fashioning a Title VII Remedy for Transparently White Subjective Decisionmaking*, 104 Yale L.J. 2009, 2013 (1995)

¹⁹ See Charles Lawrence, *The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism*, 39 Stan. L. Rev. 317, 348 (1987)

eliminate the possibility that they unconsciously view conservatives as somehow “less.” Liberal science may simply lend theoretical validation to widespread liberal sentiments, just as nineteenth-century racial science ratified a different set of settled prejudices with a patina of scientific respectability.

Goldberg does not actually pursue these lines of argument, but what he does argue implicitly sets the stage for them. As African-Americans steadily improve their status in American society, it appears that many conservatives are lining up to occupy their former place. What are we to make of this phenomenon?

* * *

In his *Culture Wars*, sociologist James Hunter noted what struck him as an astonishing symmetry between both sides of the ideological barricades. Notwithstanding their formally opposed attitudes toward religion, progressives and traditionalists have alike adopted a stance that can only be described as religious in the sense that their rhetoric is “absolute, comprehensive, and ultimate.”²⁰ Both sides have shown themselves unwilling to rely exclusively, or even primarily, on “positive moral argument.”²¹ With each side operating with fundamentally opposed conceptions of moral authority, persuasion alone has proven incapable of generating political legitimacy, and so must be supplemented by systematic ridicule and derision of the other side. This “symmetry in antipathy,” Hunter remarks, confirms the old adage that “the Left is the Right and the Right is the Left.”²² Notwithstanding their substantive disagreements, both “ends of the cultural axis claim to speak for the majority, both attempt to monopolize the symbols of legitimacy, both identify their opponents with a program of intolerance and totalitarian suppression,” just as both “use the language of extremism and thereby sensationalize the threat represented by their adversaries.”²³

This symmetry in antipathy is undoubtedly real. But the examples of Scarborough and Goldberg suggest a less noticeable, but perhaps more interesting, *asymmetry* operating underneath the surface of that symmetry. The “Left is the Right and the Right is the Left” not only in that similar levels of single-minded vitriol may be discerned in both, but also in that *the Right has become the Left* and has done so *in order to accuse the Left of becoming the Right*. After all, Scarborough and Goldberg are both engaged in what Charles Taylor calls *the politics of recognition*. Both are demanding that conservatives be understood *on their own terms* rather than assimilated to the values, interests, and prejudices of the dominant liberal

²⁰ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Basic Books 1991), pg. 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 136.

²² *Ibid.*, pg. 156.

²³ *Ibid.*, pg. 156.

culture. A demand that was traditionally the purview of the Left, leveled on behalf of women, racial minorities, gays, and the disabled against the injustices of patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, and able-ism, is now being turned against the Left itself by conservatives, who understand themselves to be issuing a parallel set of claims which liberals' own first principles require them to acknowledge.

The Right's tendency to absorb the moral and intellectual reflexes of the Left into itself, retaining their form while inverting their substance, has often been noted. As Frank observed, conservative leaders now strive to appropriate the traditional attributes of the Left, like righteous indignation at the oppression of the weak and defenseless, "swiping leftist ideas and phrases wherever they can."²⁴ Geoffrey Nunberg notes that the term "people of faith," which originally referred a New-Agey aversion to organized religion, has "caught on among conservative Christians who saw the advantages of comparing themselves with other oppressed groups."²⁵ The appropriation is undisguised in the speeches of anti-abortion activist Lila Rose, who told supporters:

Who says we can't have an America completely free, with the complete end of abortion? We can have that America. We overcame many things in our history. We've overcome many things, from slavery to civil rights abuses in the 20th century to child labor. We've overcome many things, even the Revolutionary War to have our independence won. We've overcome many things in this country. The women's rights movement for suffrage. And we can overcome. We can defeat the hopelessness and the lies and the despair that says that we need abortion somehow. And we can overcome it and it's happening.²⁶

William F. Buckley famously defined a conservative as "a fellow who is standing athwart history yelling 'Stop!'" But it seems that conservative positions are as easily heralded by "onward," as easily framed as a call to forward-looking progress, the next courageous step in an ongoing struggle for the freedom and dignity of an ever-expanding circle of moral concern. It was the liberals of the civil rights era who first chanted "we shall overcome." But it is now conservatives who ask us to overcome liberalism itself in the name of its own first principles. Corey Robin thus observes that Phyllis Schlafly "railed against the meaninglessness and lack of fulfillment among American women" in the spirit of Betty Friedan, but then "blamed these ills on feminism rather than sexism."²⁷ The ERA, observe Chip Berlet and Mathew Lyons, was opposed by Schlafly as a threat to women's most fundamental rights, such as the right to be

²⁴ Frank, pg. 159.

²⁵ Geoffrey Nunberg, *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left Wing Freak Show* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), pg. 163.

²⁶ <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/lila-rose-equates-anti-choice-movement-womens-movement-and-revolutionary-war>

²⁷ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pg. 52.

supported by a husband and to keep one's baby.²⁸ These inversions are not restricted to the feminism context. In a similar spirit, the American Center for Law and Justice or "ACLJ" is, as indicated by the acronym, the ACLU of the Right, and views itself as defending the religious freedoms of Christians against secularist oppression. In all these cases as in many others, conservatism seems informed, not by any categorical rejection of liberalism, but by the conviction that the meaning of liberal ideals is essentially indeterminate and can always be reinterpreted in accordance with conservative priorities.

The conservative appropriation of liberalism is best known to us from the New Right, with its populist struggle against the liberal elite. But Robin argues that this is hardly a new phenomenon, and has in fact been a recurring feature of mainstream conservative argument ever since Edmund Burke. Conservatism presents itself as nothing more sinister than a spirit of cautious skepticism before radical social change, a reverence for the wisdom of the ages, and a wariness of abstractions uprooted from real-life complexity. But Robin believes that conservatives' basic impulses are fundamentally reactionary, borne of animus against the agency of the oppressed. Faced with their assertions of agency, conservatism appropriates the vocabularies of revolutionary movements in order to defend old regimes that can no longer be defended on their own terms. Conservatives "look to the left for ways to bend new vernaculars, or new media, to their suddenly delegitimated aims."²⁹ It is of the essence of conservatism that it tries to make "medievalism modern,"³⁰ to "make privilege popular, to transform a tottering old regime into a dynamic, ideologically coherent movement of the masses."³¹ Conservatives have always displayed near-endless creativity in these endeavors. Already in the mid-Eighteenth Century, reactionary theologians in France were, fearful that the philosophers had taken control of popular opinion, abandoning their abstruse disquisitions in order to compose "Catholic agitprop" that could be distributed to the masses through the same networks used by the Church's Enlightenment adversaries. And Burke later recognized that to destroy the enemy—that is, the Jacobins—the "force opposed to it should be made to bear some analogy or resemblance to the force and spirit which that system exerts."³² This can only mean claiming victimhood in some fashion or other.

Conservative victimology, then, is much older than any backlash against civil rights, feminism, or the other social movements associated with the 1960s. For it is intrinsic to conservatism, which by

²⁸ Chip Berlet and Mathew N. Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2000), pg. 221.

²⁹ Robin, pg. 49.

³⁰ Ibid. pg. 29.

³¹ Ibid. pg. 42-43.

³² Ibid., pg.

definition emerges under conditions in which old relations of domination can no longer be taken for granted as the natural order of things, and must instead be defended in the very language that is wielded against them. Conservatism, says Robin, is the means by which a ruling class for the first time in history rests its claim to power upon a sense of victimhood.³³ Conservatives “have asked us not to obey them, but to feel sorry for them—or to obey them because we feel sorry for them.”³⁴

2. Conservaphobia

Whether or not it is historically novel, the conservative appropriation of liberalism is usually taken to be a calculated political strategy designed to make conservative prescriptions more palatable, an expedient to advance right-wing causes whose real rationales cannot be disclosed. However, the examples with which this discussion began suggest a rather different, though not unrelated, phenomenon. And this is the promotion of a conservative *identity politics*, a conservative *politics of recognition*. The tropes and ideals of the Left are being marshaled, not to directly advance one or another conservative *cause*, like ending abortion or untrammelled free markets, but in defense of conservatives *themselves* as an unfairly maligned social group. This is what I shall refer to as *conservative claims of cultural oppression*.

Conservatives may have always defended the established order with claims to victimhood, as Robin argues. But conservatives are now claiming victimhood in a very specific sense. They are oppressed not because they are morally entitled to the economic privileges which the Left would expropriate—as overthrown French aristocrats may have believed—but because they have been slandered, bullied, and denigrated on account of *their conservatism as such*. They are asking not for obedience but for respect, seeking to justify, not some tottering *ancien regime*, but *themselves*. The inherited prerogative which the Left threatens is not landed titles, corporate monopolies, union-busting, or any kind of white, male, or heterosexual privilege, but merely *the social dignity of being conservative*. If this can become an issue, this is, as conservatives see it, because liberal tolerance has not yet been extended to them, the last remaining social group that may be scorned and persecuted with a good conscience, the forgotten minority that somehow got overlooked amidst all the celebrations of tolerance, sensitivity, and diversity.

The trope of the persecuted conservative is familiar in the context of higher education. Putting the point crudely but poignantly, Michael Savage laments that conservative college students are “buried under an avalanche of scorn, both from their professors and peers,” treated “as if they’re Cro-Magnons

³³ Ibid. pg. 98.

³⁴ Ibid. pg. 98.

with bones in their noses.” With only “one or two rounds in the barrel...conservative-thinking students learn the local custom.” And this is “to keep their mouths shut if their viewpoints run contrary to the prevailing winds of liberalism in the classroom.”³⁵ In a similar vein, the Claire Booth Luce Policy Institute, an organization of conservative women, offers college students “conservative safe space” stickers. Appropriating a concept often used to highlight gays’ special vulnerability to harassment and abuse, the Institute explains that, with gays being “no longer the group shunned or berated on modern college campuses,” campus intolerance “has now turned on conservatives and it is the conservative students and faculty who most need a ‘safe space.’”³⁶

But a safe space is precisely what they will never be allowed. For conservatives’ cultural oppression extends well beyond the college classroom, whose hostile environment is only one dot on a broader social landscape. Conservatives have, Goldberg writes, endured “a half century of slander from the news media, academia, and Hollywood.”³⁷ This defamation has now filtered into everyday attitudes, fostering a culture of anti-conservative animus that seems to follow conservatives wherever they tread. The animus targets, not just their politics, but their very personhood. “Once alerted to your conservatism,” writes James Poulos, “most people do not believe you when you tell them you are interesting. They chalk up your worldly exploits and subtleties of spirit to an unearned luxury—the product of unresolved internal contradictions, laziness, hypocrisy, or subterranean false consciousness.” Conservatives, and especially professional conservatives, are deemed “unfit for life off the reservation, unable and unwilling to function in any truly human environment.”³⁸ Conservatives aren’t merely mistaken, or even just benighted, but lacking in genuine human agency, which is what their political views are understood to betray.

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe they are the targets of a visceral hatred that has no analogue on the Right and that cannot be explained away as the ordinary rough-and-tumble of politics. Ann Coulter complains that left-leaning MSNBC hosts will night after night “maniacally fixate on some conservative they hate,” it being a “specialty of the Left” to sneer and snicker at political opponents.³⁹ The “liberal bias” of the “mainstream media” and other bastions of liberalism is not a strictly intellectual partiality toward liberal policies, but a visceral antipathy toward conservatives as people. Bill

³⁵ Michael Savage, *The Enemy Within: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on our Schools, Faith, and Military* (Thomas Nelson, 2003), pg. 211.

³⁶ http://www.cblpi.org/students/safe_space.cfm

³⁷ Goldberg, pg. 38.

³⁸ James Poulos, *The Leptogonians: Growing Up Conservative in a Disrupted Decade*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation* (Jonah Goldberg ed., Harper, New York 2010), pg. 158-60.

³⁹ Ann Coulter, *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob Is Endangering America* (New York: Crown Forum, 2011), pg. 288.

O'Reilly concedes that some traditionalists "are captive to the same degree of irrational anger that many in the S-P [secular-progressive] crew are," but on the whole "S-P anger is far more intense and personal."⁴⁰ Sean Hannity warns that, with their ruthlessness, dishonesty, and take-no-prisoners approach to politics, "many liberals are capable of singular viciousness."⁴¹ Yet liberals are never held to account for this. Savage laments that "there's a double standard in this country," because "[i]f you're a liberal, you don't get sent to the thought police no matter what you say or how conservaphobic you may be."⁴² Liberals would erect vast regimes of sensitivity training to uproot every last trace of real or imagined homophobia. But they will not take the slightest steps to remedy another, equally pressing problem, which is their own conservaphobia, the fact that liberal virtue and anti-conservative hatred have now become one and the same thing.

Racism can be expressed, not only in direct assertions of white racial superiority, but also in subtle, and therefore deniable, cues and patterns. Likewise, conservaphobia can be the implicit subtext rather than official text of the conversation. Coulter observes that liberals featured on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* are "always bathed in a beatific light, while conservatives are photographed in lighting that casts a menacing glow and always seem to show five o'clock shadows."⁴³ Brian Anderson notes that television and Hollywood treat "lawyers, teachers, social workers, and others who work in liberal professions" to "mostly sunny portrayals" while disproportionately casting businessmen in villain roles.⁴⁴ If the entertainment industry formerly relegated African-Americans to the roles of pimps, criminals, vagrants, and other undesirables, so now it is conservatives who must play social pariahs. The denigration is communicated, if not always through direct assertion, then certainly through cumulative impression. O'Reilly concedes that TV political humor targets the whole ideological spectrum. But the total "body count" reveals that it is conservatives who bear the brunt of the mockery. The "cumulative effect of print and TV commentary that largely denigrates conservative thought and traditional values cannot be overestimated,"⁴⁵ because the final message is always that "[l]iberals are smart and conservatives are dense."⁴⁶

⁴⁰ O'Reilly, *Culture Warrior*, pg. 162.

⁴¹ Sean Hannity, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty over Liberalism* (New York HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), pg. 232.

⁴² Michael Savage, *The Savage Nation: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on Our Borders, Language, and Culture* (Plume 2002), pg. 35.

⁴³ Ann Coulter, *Guilty: Liberal "Victims" and Their Assault on America* (New York: Three Rivers, 2009), pg. 230.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, pg. 14

⁴⁵ Bill O'Reilly, *Culture Warrior* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), pg. 26.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* pg. 57-58.

This environment is alleged to have seriously eroded conservatives' quality of life. Just as blacks in the Jim Crow south faced the constant risk of harassment from racist whites, for whom blackness was provocation enough, so Ben Shapiro explains that today's young conservatives "have to face liberal bullying on a daily basis, from the elementary school level through grad school and on into their careers (particularly law, education, and Hollywood)."⁴⁷ Conservative commentator Laura Ingraham was bullied at her first media job at CBS when she was prohibited from entering the make-up room until liberal Paula Zahn had exited.⁴⁸ Conservative book buyers are bullied by the unionized employees of Barnes & Noble, who David Horowitz alleges "go[] out of their way to make conservative book purchasers, whom they regard as barely literate philistines, feel unwelcome."⁴⁹ Jebediah Billa's *Outnumbered*, the "Chronicles of a Manhattan Conservative" is an autobiographical account of the author's life in New York City during the heady days of the 2008 elections. This is hostile, unforgiving world in which a conservative with a "Palin Power" lapel pin cannot so much as enter a subway car or turn a street corner without being denounced as "racist," "dumb," or an "ignorant bitch" by an anonymous passerby.⁵⁰ Billa was flabbergasted when an acquaintance acknowledged that "I just know that I was brought up to know that conservatives aren't good people. And people I've met...conservative people...always just rub me the wrong way."⁵¹ What Jews were a century ago, conservatives are today, for unthinking, inherited prejudice is given a free pass in this mecca of enlightened progressivism where conservatives are concerned.

Liberals will deny their conservaphobia and chalk up the intensity of their anger toward conservatives to conservatives' the own beliefs and conduct. But do opponents of homosexuality not justify their homophobia in the same way, as principled moral opposition to a socially deleterious practice? If conservatives can be second-guessed in their accounts of their own motivations, then so too can liberals. Liberals hold that "moral opposition" to homosexuality reveals more about the moral opponent than it does about homosexuals. And in the same vein, conservatives believe that conservaphobia is a symptom of liberals' unacknowledged internal conflicts. David Kahane charges that progressives are people "consumed with [a] primal but irrational desire to inflict [their] emotions on you, so that you might share [their] misery and feel [their] pain."⁵² Conservatives are the new socially

⁴⁷ Ben Shapiro, *Why I'm Glad Liberals Are Bullies*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation* (Jonah Goldberg ed., Harper, New York 2010), pg. 208.

⁴⁸ Laura Ingraham, *Power to the People* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2007), pg. 236.

⁴⁹ Qd. in Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005), pg. 135.

⁵⁰ Jedediah Billa, *Outnumbered: Chronicles of a Manhattan Conservative* (2011), pgs. 10, 23.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 67.

⁵² David Kahane, *Rules for Radical Conservatives: Beating the Left at Its Own Game to Take Back America* (Ballantine Books, 2010), pg. 156.

sanctioned scapegoats, foils upon which liberals project every social ill and externalize every psychic conflict, rationalizing their projections with an aura of moral high-mindedness that disguises their real motivations.

* * *

As this brief snapshot of the terrain reveals, conservatives are insatiable in their drive to document the sins and hypocrisies of the Left. Such is necessary if they are to set the record straight and free their kind from the dark cloud of suspicion which the dominant liberal culture hangs over them wherever they tread. Just as one cannot possibly be expected to recognize the rights and dignity of gays while mired in homophobia, so one will be unable to give conservative ideas a fair hearing while mired in conservaphobia, in whose light conservatives cannot but appear nefarious, irrational, or otherwise unappealing.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression arise in a multitude of contexts and their ultimate theoretical content is elusive. But they conform to some general patterns, foremost among which is the imperative to place the historic opponents of the Left—conservatives and especially conservative Christians—in roles which the Left has heretofore reserved for the designated oppressed—racial minorities, women, gays, and colonized people. Correlatively, these claims place the Left in roles which have been historically reserved for conservatives, oppressive stalwarts who, dogmatically inured to competing claims and perspectives, seek to preserve their arbitrary privileges and benighted traditions at all costs. Conservatives believe they are oppressed by a culture that slanders the real victims as the oppressors and celebrates the real oppressors as the victims, or else as the victims' heroic rescuers. Their claims of cultural oppression constitute an effort to expose and overturn this state of affairs. They advance a conservative politics of recognition, demanding that conservatives be understood on their own terms, rather than dismissed as authoritarian, bigoted, benighted, or misologistic. They aren't just venting personal grievances, as they see it, but highlighting the existence of a new cultural dispensation that has supplanted the old rules of public life, where the *modus operandi* is always the slander, humiliation, and intimidation of conservatives. If liberals inveigh against the oppressiveness and hypocrisy of conservatives, then they must be prepared to have their own oppressiveness and hypocrisy unmasked as well. If liberals insist on diversity, tolerance, and equal respect, then conservatives insist that they be afforded the genuine articles rather than the Orwellian inversions that liberalism in fact offers.

What I am designating as conservative claims of cultural oppression is best understood as a subcategory of the more general phenomenon of the Right's appropriation of the Left, and one which has

as its locus what is alleged to be a set of *social, cultural, and political inequalities between conservatives and liberals*. These claims are, in a sense, that appropriation taken to its logical conclusion, the displacement of the usual substantive issues by a discourse in which the relationship between those who debate those issues becomes an issue in its own right, a new issue that frames the meaning of the old ones. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are in practice intertwined with the defense of specific conservative causes. But insofar as an argument functions as a conservative claim of cultural oppression, the underlying issue is always the broader culture in which particular causes are argued and advanced, the perennial disadvantage in which that culture places conservatives, and conservatives' heroic resilience in the face of that disadvantage.

Conservatism has always *prescribed* some form of cultural nationalism on the premise that uprooted moral universalism cannot provide the social cohesion facilitated by narrower circles of identification, in which true ethical feeling must always be rooted. Burke urged that loving "the little platoon we belong to," is "the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind."⁵³ But conservatism has now *become* a form of cultural nationalism, for the "little platoon" is now defined by conservatism itself. Conservatives understand themselves as a despised, stigmatized group that, in punishment for its rejection of liberalism, has been unofficially banished from full and equal participation in public life. In claiming cultural oppression, they celebrate a new kind of *quasi-ethnic* identity and narrative. Laura Ingraham observes:

They think we're stupid. They think our patriotism is stupid. They think our churchgoing is stupid. They think our flag-waving is stupid. They think having big families is stupid. They think where we live—anywhere but near or in a few major cities—is stupid. They think our SUVs are stupid. They think owning a gun is stupid. They think our abiding belief in the goodness of America and its founding principles is stupid. They think the choices we make at the ballot box are stupid. They think George W. Bush is stupid. And without a doubt, they will think this book is stupid.⁵⁴

Where liberals see stupidity, conservative claimants of cultural oppression see the silent heroism of a beleaguered and colonized people, who resist the encroachments of a coterie of cloistered elites, uprooted rationalists and cosmopolitans with nothing but contempt for the indigenous culture of the less eloquent but more wholesome ordinary American, who is now seen to exist on a lower moral, intellectual, and spiritual plane. This judgment is not the reasoned conclusion of individual deliberation, but the collective, taken-for-granted premise of the liberal culture, which thrives only at the expense of conservatives. The liberalism which conservatives confront is not only an opposing philosophy of which

⁵³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Penguin Books, 1968), pg. 135.

⁵⁴ Laura Ingraham, *Shut Up & Sing: How Elites from Hollywood, Politics, and the UN Are Subverting America* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2003), pg. 1.

they remain unpersuaded, but also an opposing culture of which that philosophy is just the formalized expression. It is a set of distinctive sensibilities, mores, and prejudices all anathema to their identities as conservatives.

3. We Are All Liberals Now

Conservative claims of cultural oppression are precisely what could be expected to emerge if Roger Kimball is correct that liberalism now “prescribes not only the terms of debate, but also the rhetorical atmosphere in which any debate must take place.” With liberalism having become taken-for-granted common sense, even conservative initiatives must be advanced “in a context saturated by liberal assumptions.” Thus, we “are all liberals now, by dint of contagion if not conviction.”⁵⁵ Given liberalism’s present rhetorical supremacy, it is natural that conservatives would prefer to reinterpret liberal ideals in their own favor rather than categorically reject them, which they do by arguing that the protection of liberalism’s own first principles has yet to be extended to them and that liberals are therefore guilty of the very moral and intellectual vices they associate with conservatives.

Hunter is quite correct that neither side of the “culture wars” is prepared to take the other one at face value, preferring instead to caricature it as fanatically outside the mainstream. But it is only liberals who stand accused of *betraying* their most cherished values. Liberals may characterize as conservative authoritarianism what conservatives themselves would defend as reasonable moral authority. But the disagreement here concerns only the particular valence to be attached to the conservative position, not its basic character. Similarly, liberals may dismiss trickle-down economics as a disingenuous selling point for rich-friendly tax policies. But conservatives do not deny that they countenance economic inequality. In neither case is the true nature of conservatives’ basic commitments itself under dispute. The social conservative acknowledges his willingness to sacrifice social freedom to social order, just as the economic conservative acknowledges his willingness to sacrifice equality to property rights. By contrast, conservatives’ attacks on liberals go to the core, and not just the periphery, of liberalism’s self-understanding. Conservative claims of cultural oppression seek to expose liberalism’s core values—cultural diversity, tolerance, freedom of conscience, and social equality—as empty shams disguising what is an entirely *opposite* set of commitments. And this is why liberals are criticized, not only by conservative standards, but by their own ones as well.

⁵⁵ Roger Kimball, *Mill, Stephen, and the Nature of Freedom*, in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), pg. 44.

This places conservative practice into tension with conservative theory. Roger Scruton writes that “the root error of liberalism in all its forms” is its “inability to accept, or even to perceive, the inherited forms of social knowledge.”⁵⁶ This insensibility, the legacy of Rousseau, is revealed in the fact that everywhere “[s]ocial contests and tensions have been conceptualized in a way that favors the liberal cause.” They have been conceptualized in “terms of power: who enjoys it and who suffers it—‘who? Whom?,’ in Lenin’s summary,” rather than in terms of “[w]hich institutions, which procedures, and which customs preserve and enhance the store of social knowledge.”⁵⁷ But conservatives have not themselves escaped this tendency, and so will now conceptualize as problems of power what could have been conceptualized as problems of social knowledge. Taking Wal-Mart’s critics to task, George Will writes:

Liberals think their campaign against Wal-Mart is a way of introducing the subject of class into America’s political argument, and they are more correct than they understand. Their campaign is liberalism as condescension. It is a *philosophic* repugnance toward markets, because consumer sovereignty results in the masses making messes. Liberals, aghast, see the choices Americans make with their dollars and their ballots and announce—yes, announce—that Americans are surely in need of more supervision by....liberals.⁵⁸

Will could have restricted himself to challenging Wal-Mart’s critics for their indifference to the sources of social knowledge, perhaps arguing that Wal-Mart’s characteristic efficiencies embody a form of collective intelligence that only untrammelled free markets facilitate. But this does not content him. Though Will accuses liberals of introducing the subject of class into America’s political argument, it is clearly *he* who is endorsing class as an interpretive category, so long as the class in question is the liberal elites. It turns out, then, that it is not the category of power as such that favors the liberal cause, but only one particular understanding of how power works. Understand power in another way and the category redounds to the conservative cause. Will has simply inverted Frank’s thesis that cultural questions are calculated distractions from a status quo of rampant economic inequality, suggesting instead that bread-and-butter concerns are the pretext through which liberals advance their presumptions to cultural superiority vis-à-vis the unwashed masses, whose all-American disorderliness offends their parochial notions of propriety. Even an old-school, sober-minded conservative like George Will now follows Lenin in asking “who? Whom?”

⁵⁶ Roger Scruton, Rousseau and the Origins of Liberalism in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), pg. 27.

⁵⁷ Ibid. pg. 41.

⁵⁸ Qt in S.E. Cupp and Brett Joshpe, *Why You’re Wrong About The Right: Behind The Myths—The Surprising Truth About Conservatives* (New York: Thresholds Editions, 2008), pg. 168.

Frank remarks that conservative commentary now mirrors the leftist thought of the early Twentieth Century, as traditional Left critiques “of the legal establishment, the foreign policy establishment, the world of architecture, and government itself are also stood nearly on their heads, with each institution now said to be a slavish servant—not of The Interests but of liberalism.”⁵⁹ Ostensibly, liberalism and conservatism are different standpoints from which to evaluate the desirability of various socio-political trade-offs. But with conservative claims of cultural oppression, they become the *subject matter* of the analysis. That is, the relationship between liberals and conservatives is itself among the socio-political arrangements to be scrutinized. Conservatives are not just individuals defined by their opinions about the nature and scope of our rights, but also rights-bearers whose rights are being unfairly abrogated by liberals. Correlatively, liberalism isn’t just a philosophy for weighing or reconciling opposing interests, but a set of interests in its own right, which disguise themselves in a philosophy just like “The Interests” of old disguised themselves in free-market arguments. At the same time, there is an important asymmetry. In condemning conservatism as an ideological rationalization for certain class interests, liberals at least distinguish conservatism as a philosophy from the special interests the philosophy serves—wealth, patriarchy, and so forth. But for conservative claimants of cultural oppression, liberalism is *both* the philosophy and the special interest, both the currency that liberals strive to accumulate and the ideological rationalization for that accumulation. Liberalism could have taken the place of “The Interests” because liberals aren’t just misguided people, but rather a foreign tribe whose way of life is built on the subjugation of conservatives.

Kimball writes that notwithstanding some significant center-right electoral victories, conservatives have been the “conspicuous losers” in the culture wars. For the electoral successes have “done almost nothing to challenge the dominance of left-wing, emancipationist attitudes and ideas in our culture.”⁶⁰ However, it is a defining theme of conservative claims of cultural oppression that conservatives are not simply the losers in the sense that things have not gone their way, but moreover are the *victims*. While there is a sense in which everyone has been victimized by liberalism, the claimants believe that, as its foremost opponents, they have been burdened with special penalties from which others do not suffer. The “traditional” conservative understands himself as harmed by liberalism in the same way liberals are harmed by liberalism—that is, in the same way everyone is harmed by wrongheaded policies. But the

⁵⁹ Ibid. pg. 130.

⁶⁰ Roger Kimball, *The Long March: How the Culture Revolution of the 1960s Changed America* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), pg. 274.

conservative claimant of cultural oppression carries a more individuated grievance against liberalism and believes he has special standing to complain of unique harms that liberals are privileged to avoid.

The conservative magazine *Chronicles* laments that

Once upon a time in America, you could say you loved your country, believed in God, and held your marriage sacred...and not be snickered at as a simple-minded simpleton.

You could believe in honesty, hard work, and self-reliance; you could speak of human *responsibilities* in the same breath as human rights...and not be derided as an insensitive fool.

You could speak out against profane books, depraved movies, and decadent art; you could express your disapproval of drug-sodden entertainers, America-hating educators, and appeasement-obsessed legislators...and *not* be branded as an ignorant reactionary.

And yes, once upon a time in America, you could actually believe in morality, both public and private, and not be proclaimed a hopeless naïf—more to be pitied than taken seriously.

But that was before the “censorship of fashion” took control of contemporary American culture.

This insidious form of censorship is not written into our laws or statutes—but it is *woven* into the very *fabric* of our culture. It reigns supreme in literature and the arts, on television, and in film, in music and on radio, in our churches, our public schools, and our universities. And above all else, it is dedicated to the propagation of one agenda—the *liberal activist* agenda for America.

The “censorship of fashion” is not only sinister and subtle, it’s also ruthlessly *effective*. It employs the powerful weapons of *ridicule* and condescension to stifle the voices of millions of Americans, like you, who still cherish our traditional values.⁶¹

Insofar as a conservative is claiming cultural oppression, the issue is *not* the substantive merits of patriotism, religion, traditional marriage, hard work, and so forth, but *his very ability to defend these values* in the face of the “censorship of fashion.” The grievance is not that liberals impede the implementation of conservative ideas, but that they impede or attempt to impede conservatives in their *authenticity* as conservatives. Liberalism is pernicious not only for its substantive agenda but also for the special social and psychological costs which this agenda imposes upon conservatives and ordinary Americans—costs that liberals do not bear and therefore cannot recognize. Here is the deep asymmetry overlooked by Hunter. To the extent liberals view themselves as victimized by conservatives, this is in their capacity as women, gays, racial minorities, union members, creative individualists or perhaps just freedom-loving Americans. They do not, however, see themselves as victimized *as liberals*. By contrast, conservatives see themselves as victimized by liberals, not only as law-abiding Americans, self-reliant entrepreneurs, and productive taxpayers, but also in their capacity *as conservatives*. And so conservative policies are now advanced, not only for their perceived advantages, but as affirmations of conservatives’ right to self-determination in the face of liberal hegemony.

⁶¹ Qt. in Hunter, *Culture Wars*, pg. 244.

The “traditional” conservative seeks to expose liberalism’s *limitations as a theory*. He argues that inherited moral sentiment cannot be kept out of law, that socio-economic equality is a dangerously utopian aspiration, and that liberals overestimate our highly limited ability to track social causality and anticipate the unintended consequences of the rapid social transformations they would recklessly initiate. Michael Oakeshott, for example, writes that there “is no such thing as an unqualified improvement,” because innovating necessarily generates a complex situation of which improvement is at best only one component. And since innovation always entails certain loss and only possible gain, the burden of persuasion lies with the innovator.⁶² The conservative claimant of cultural oppression may believe this as well. But he is, beyond criticizing liberalism on this theoretical level, centrally concerned to expose its nature *as a social practice*, to expose liberal prescriptions as the sectarian imposition of a parochial way of life. The problem isn’t that we lack the epistemic wherewithal to accurately set off expected gains against unforeseeable losses, but, on the contrary, that we know all too well that the gains will accrue to liberals at the expense of conservatives.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression articulate liberalism *performatively*, in terms of what liberals *are trying to do*. Ben Shapiro told a Heritage Foundation audience:

Once you see what they’re doing it can’t be unseen. You’ll see it everywhere now. When you watch the media and you see the questions they’re asking you’ll see underneath there’s a patina of character assassination. Always. There’s not a single question that they’re asking where underneath it’s not character assassination. When David Gregory is brandishing a [assault rifle] magazine on national television, he’s saying to [NRA spokesman] Wayne LaPierre “you don’t care that kids were killed in Sandy Hook.” That’s what he’s doing. When you see Barack Obama saying you know these Republicans they just don’t understand how their economic policy works, what he’s really saying is “they stand for rich people, they hate poor people.”⁶³

The objection is not to liberal ideas *per se*—e.g., gun control and economic equality—but to *the oppressive social function of liberal ideas*, the fact that they are in their practical application used to surreptitiously denigrate the moral stature of conservatives. Conservatives, says Hannity, no longer confront the “honest liberalism” of yesteryear’s Democratic Party, which is “no longer just about implementing liberal ideas” and instead about “demonizing conservatives and Republicans through distortion and disinformation.”⁶⁴ The original sin of liberalism isn’t the promotion of a foolhardy egalitarianism that ignores timeless truths about the crooked timber of humanity, but the fraudulent concealment of a fundamentally oppressive disposition. The problem is not that well-intentioned liberals set their sights too high out of misguided idealism, but that liberalism’s professed commitments are fundamentally disingenuous. Liberalism is no

⁶² Michael Oakeshott, *On Being Conservative*, pg. 2.

⁶³ <http://www.heritage.org/events/2013/01/bullies>

⁶⁴ Hannity, *Let Freedom Ring*, pg. 275.

longer defined by ideas, but by the collective defamation of conservatives. And it is to remedy this defamation that conservatives appropriate the ideals of liberalism and claim cultural oppression.

* * *

It can be objected that my thesis—that the Right has become the Left in order to accuse the Left of becoming the Right—is only trivially true. After all, there is a certain range of moral abstractions—freedom, fairness, and tolerance among others—that few will baldly reject and which will be defended in one form or another along most of the political spectrum. Likewise, no political philosophy or ideology proceeds without some implicit moral hierarchy of victims and victimizers, just as none dispenses with some notion of false consciousness. Thus, it will always be possible to discover some convergence between Left and Right. And given that American conservatives view themselves as liberals in the nineteenth-century, “classical” sense of the term, it is natural that they should accuse “modern liberals” of betraying the core tenets of true liberalism. But this, it will be argued, does not prove that it is useful to think of the Right as becoming the Left in order to accuse the Left of becoming the Right. It is commonplace for political enemies to accuse each other of betraying their own professed principles. But this timeless feature of political rhetoric, one will say, does not carry the special significance I am trying to assign it.

However, I hope to show, if I have not already shown, that the ideological convergence apparent in conservative claims of cultural oppression is concrete rather than abstract and is not a function of the inherent abstractness of core political ideals. The conservative claimant of cultural oppression does not stake his claim to the principle of moral equality by avouching that conservatives believe in moral equality before God rather than the ephemeral this-worldly equality that preoccupies liberals. Rather, he insists, with Shapiro, that the ostensible opponents of bullying are the true bullies, that “buried underneath all of the left’s supposed hatred for bullying is a passionate love for bullying.”⁶⁵ The claimants aren’t just drawing upon essentially contested concepts but attempting to give the left “a taste of its own medicine,” self-consciously effecting a *role reversal* whose reference point is liberals’ *particular conceptualizations of the essentially contested concepts*. In striving to expose these conceptualizations’ essential indeterminacy, the claimants hope to demonstrate that they can always be re-deployed in the service of conservative grievances. Thus, John Hawkins notes that while liberals accuse conservatives of defending straight, white, heterosexual male privilege, they have yet to acknowledge their own “liberal privilege,” like the

⁶⁵ Ben Shapiro, *Bullies: How the Left’s Culture of Fear and Intimidation Silences America* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2013), pg. 4.

privilege of flying in private jets while parading as environmentalists.⁶⁶ Some whites may be privileged inasmuch as they grow up in safe suburban neighborhoods with all the educational amenities. But then liberals are privileged, argues Melvin Fein, inasmuch as they are praised by their liberal teachers from elementary school onward for their special compassion and acuity, which fortifies the conceit that they are smarter and more caring than others.⁶⁷

Conservative claims of cultural oppression are not ordinary political discourse but a meta-discourse. They are not an academic argument about the ultimate scope of equality as a moral or political ideal, but a practical attempt to expose how liberals' assessment of that scope has been fine-tuned to serve liberals' class interests. Liberals believe themselves "above the fray" as they issue their moral judgments about the world. But they are in fact *in* the fray, one of the parties about whom such judgments can be formed. Liberals will argue that conservative claimants of cultural oppression "change the subject" in order to "distract from the real issues." But the claimants retort that the subject has been defined ahead of time in accordance with liberal interests and that they are therefore under no obligation to respect what liberals unilaterally classify as "real." They are engaged in a "hermeneutics of suspicions" that penetrates beyond the usual categories in order to expose a layer of political and social meanings which the "real issues" obscure.

To be sure, the "conservative claimant of cultural oppression" is a theoretical construct of my own devising, an ideal type that is imperfectly instantiated in real, flesh-and-blood individuals. It is not a notion that directly corresponds to most conservatives' articulated self-conceptions, as does "traditional values conservative," or "national greatness conservative," or even, as we shall later see, "punk conservative." And as the instrument of an impressionistic (armchair) sociology, nor does it lend itself to any direct empirical refutation. Nevertheless, I believe it captures the essence of a certain sensibility, a by now perennial feature of the *zeitgeist* that has been bemoaned more intensively than it has been examined.

Robin is surely correct that the differences between today's "populist conservatism" and the older, ostensibly more intellectualized variety can be exaggerated. The victimization of the ostensible victimizers has been a recurring theme of conservative thought, and can be found in writers like Burke and Russell Kirk, hardly populist rabble-rousers. Burke described Louis XVI as "the most humiliated creature that crawls upon the earth" and sympathized with Marie-Antoinette as a "persecuted woman."⁶⁸ Bemoaning the decline of the South's conservative influence on national life after the Civil War, Kirk

⁶⁶ <http://townhall.com/columnists/johnhawkins/2014/04/15/15-examples-of-liberal-privilege-n1824468/page/full>

⁶⁷ <http://mdjonline.com/bookmark/25295667-Liberal-privilege-and-the-lies-of-the-left>

⁶⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, pg. 163-4.

declared that while “Northern men of conscience had reason to be shocked at much that occurred south of Mason’s and Dixon’s Line,” Southerners “had as good cause to resent the supercilious intolerance of New England...”⁶⁹ Likewise, charge that leftists are contemptuous of “ordinary people” surely predates any “backlash” against the 1960s. Long before then, Burke railed against “those democratists who, when they are not on their guard, treat the humbler part of the community with the greatest contempt, whilst, at the same time, they pretend to make them the depositories of all power.”⁷⁰

Chronicles treats the “censorship of fashion” as a new phenomenon. But Kirk lamented that late nineteenth-century conservatives became unsettled in their first principles by the march of science and “shrank before the Positivists, the Darwinians, and the astronomers.”⁷¹ The intimidation of conservatives by the forces of modernism has a distinguished pedigree, it seems, and is not limited to those now fancying themselves “ordinary Americans.” Nor are anxieties about an intellectual elite conspiring from behind the scene to maintain a stranglehold on the means of cultural reproduction. Unable to realize their ends by “any direct or immediate act,” the atheists of Burke’s day conspired to pursue them “by a longer process through the medium of opinion,” to which end the “first step is to establish a dominion over those who direct it.” O’Reilly alleges that late-night television comedy paints liberals as smart and conservatives as dense. And in the same spirit, Burke’s atheists connived “to confine the reputation of sense, learning, and taste to themselves or their followers,” and sought with “an unremitting industry to blacken and discredit in every way, and by every means, all those who did not hold to their faction.”⁷² Conservatives have long held that intellectuals are motivated by their own self-contained interests, and long warned that centralized planning, unqualified equality, and other utopian dreams are recipes for a leveling and homogenizing tyranny. The language may have changed, but conservative claims of cultural oppression are built atop of these long-held conservative suspicions.

Nevertheless, there remains an important difference. For these suspicions originally developed against the backdrop of certain attitudes of *reverence* before some larger order, a certain sense of *resignation* before its inheritance. “Each contract of each particular state” wrote Burke, “is but a clause in the great primaevial contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and the invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.”⁷³ While American conservatives

⁶⁹ Russel Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (BN Publishing, 2008) pg. 298.

⁷⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, pg. 146.

⁷¹ Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, pg. 325.

⁷² Burke, *Reflections*, pg. 212

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pg. 195.

could never really sign onto Burke's pre-modern sympathies, they have traditionally embraced modernized and democratized variants of the reverence and resignation he prescribed. By contrast, conservative claims of cultural oppression replace these with a form of social skepticism and suspicion that originated on the post-modern Left.

Wendy Brown and Janet Halley explain that Left critique seeks "to reveal subterranean structures or aspects of a particular discourse, not necessarily to reveal the truth of or about that discourse." Left critique analyzes "existing discourses of power to understand how subjects are fabricated or positioned by them, what powers they secure (and disguise or veil), what assumptions they naturalize, what privileges they fix, what norms they mobilize, and what or whom these norms exclude."⁷⁴ While the critical theory of the right lacks the methodological self-consciousness enjoyed by its left-wing counterpart, the underlying spirit of fascination with the *subterranean* is akin. And this fascination has gradually supplanted Burke's vaunted "invisible world." Shapiro's address to the Heritage Foundation was concerned, not with the underlying truth about gun control, but with the unstated social hierarchy being reinforced by liberal calls for gun control, with how (conservative) "subjects are fabricated or positioned" by gun control discourse. This is also what drives Goldberg's objections to "the ever new science of conservative phrenology." His concern isn't the ultimate truth about the biological substratum of political ideology, but the norms "mobilized" by liberal discussions thereof, the fact that liberals permit themselves to discuss conservatives in terms that are strictly taboo where women and minorities are concerned. The conservative hermeneutics of suspicion has yet to be satisfactorily theorized. But the entire gamut of left-analytical concepts—cultural domination, social construction, ideological superstructure, class-bias, the reification of the contingent, etc.—appears to be operating implicitly, providing many classical conservative arguments with a new twist.

George Nash observes that the history of the American conservative movement from its post-war inception to the New Right of the 1980s and 1990s was marked by a curious combination of continuity and change. On one level, the New Right clearly harkened back to the traditionalism that helped launch post-war American conservatism. However,

[W]hereas the traditionalists in the 1940s and 1950s had largely been academics in revolt *against* secularized, mass society, the New Right was a revolt *by* the "masses" against the secular virus and its aggressive carriers in the nation's elites. And whereas the conservative intellectual movement since 1945 had heretofore concentrated mostly on national issues and politics, the New Right was essentially the product of traumas experienced by "ordinary" people in their everyday lives. Its anguish was that of parents who discovered that their children were being offered condoms at school, were being taught that homosexual behavior was just another lifestyle, and were being

⁷⁴Wendy Brown and Janet Halley, *Introduction*, in *Left Legalsim/Left Critique*, eds. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (Duke University Press, 2002), pg. 26.

instructed that biblical standards of right and wrong were “relative,” “sexist,” and “homophobic.””⁷⁵

It isn’t obvious that the post-war traditionalists and the New Right were seriously divided by any strictly *theoretical* disagreements. Even if the former had secularized mass society as their target, they were surely aware that widespread cultural change is often spearheaded by intellectual elites. And even if they elected to focus their energies on cultural decline writ large rather than the trials and tribulations of “ordinary people,” it stands to reason that cultural decline, if genuine, would produce. However, while the differences between these stages of American conservatism may be minimal on a narrowly theoretical plane, they are substantial on the level of basic temperament. And it is this contrast that defines conservative claims of cultural oppression, whose relationship to traditional conservative sentiment is fraught with ambiguity.

The traditional moralist responds to the decline of intellectual and aesthetic taste with a combination of contempt and exasperation. By contrast, conservative claims of cultural oppression are most prominently characterized by *resentment*. The traditional moralist warns that the barbarians are at the gates, or perhaps already inside the city walls. But the conservative claimant of cultural oppression goes a step further and announces that the barbarians have already enslaved the city’s denizens. Becoming resigned to their own subjugation in a brave new world of hegemonic liberalism, these denizens have lost the very memory of their former freedom and dignity, which is what conservative claims of cultural oppression seek to recover. Conservatives continue to uphold the traditional morality threatened by emancipationist values. But the emphasis is less on the *enforcement* of morality against the assorted depredations of isolated deviants, and more on the *defense* of morality against a coterie of elites bent on eradicating the last vestiges of its prestige. The danger is not that relaxing moralistic legislation will precipitate social disintegration, as a traditional moralist like Lord Devlin feared, but that this disintegration is merely the expedient through which liberalism is erecting a new moralistic order atop the ruins of the old. Whereas the traditional moralist is concerned to protect the “moral fiber of society,” the conservative claimant of cultural oppression is concerned to *protect those individuals and groups who most depend on this fiber*. It is precisely this personalization and subjectivization that translates what was the dispassionate commentary of the 1950s traditionalists into a critical theory of the Right that takes as its target the unstated norms, privileges, and assumptions that now suffuse liberal-conservative relations.

⁷⁵ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), pg. 558.

Nomi Stolzenberg explains that the “classic critique” of liberalism (in the “classical,” nonpartisan sense of the term) accepts liberalism’s self-presentation as tolerant, inclusive, pluralistic, and neutral at face value but objects that these ideals deprive illiberal subcultures of their own self-governance, leading them to whither way.⁷⁶ By contrast, the “reverse critique” or “progressive critique” of liberalism refuses to accept liberalism at face value. The problem is not the atomization of traditional communities or the erosion of traditional authority but, on the contrary, that liberalism allows myriad forms of collectivist coercion to remain sheltered in the private sphere, where power is exerted in ways that both liberalism and the classic critique fail to recognize⁷⁷ Hence the machinations of capital in the economy or of patriarchy in the home. Stolzenberg’s contrast is also the difference between traditional conservatism and conservative claims of cultural oppression. Whereas traditional conservatism accepts the “classic critique,” arguing that liberalism unfairly discounts traditional communal values that resist its individualistic conventions, conservative claims of cultural oppression appropriate the “progressive critique” for conservatism. The problem isn’t an excess of freedom or individualism, but that these ideals are vitiated by the machinations of the liberal elite, whose monopoly over the means of cultural reproduction grants them unacknowledged powers of coercion, vitiating the ideals for which they claim to stand.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression can be free-standing, as exemplified by *Chronicles*, or embedded in a broader discussion that does not have the oppression of conservatives as its epicenter. Accordingly, these claims can be more or less explicit. Though the controversies we associate with the “culture wars” will often elicit these claims, they need not do so in every case, as it is entirely possible to debate abortion without reference to the stigmatization of conservatives or the privileges of liberals. Conversely, matters that are not usually classified as “cultural,” like foreign policy and economics, can become platforms for the claiming of cultural oppression to the extent liberal policy positions are framed as parochial cultural norms to which conservatives are being unfairly subjected.

Thus, Ralph Peters observes that the Obama administration was blindsided by the outrage provoked by its decision to release five terrorist prisoners in exchange for the return of one Sergeant Bergdahl, who was reported to have deserted his post in Afghanistan before being captured by a Taliban-allied group. The administration’s surprise, writes Peters, reflected “a fundamental culture clash” betokening the administration’s contempt for Americans “so dumb” as to join the military rather than

⁷⁶ Nomi Maya Stolzenberg, *The Return of the Repressed: Illiberal Groups in a Liberal State*, 12 J. Contemp. Legal Issues 897, pg. 898.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 914-15.

attend Harvard. Obama's National Security Advisor Susan Rice praised Bergdahl for having served "with honor and distinction." But she failed to appreciate that desertion is among the very worst transgressions a soldier can commit against his comrades, and is not at all like "sleeping in on Monday morning and ducking Gender Studies 101."⁷⁸ The problem was not merely the strategic wisdom of the prisoner exchange, but the cultural values which that exchange ratified, the imposition of liberal norms to the detriment of military virtue.

Economics too can become a cultural issue. Goldberg writes that the liberal vision of an advanced society "is one where it is finally rich enough to liberate the middle class from their comfortable bourgeois life-styles and to subsidize their conversion to bohemian ones." Liberals intend "to win the centuries'-old war on the middle class by subsidizing the bohemian lifestyle to the point where it no longer pays to be bourgeois."⁷⁹ Liberals' redistributive schemes are not animated by abstract philosophical principles, but by a concrete preference for some cultural groups over others. Thus, Shapiro charges that President Obama was behaving as a "class bully" and an "anti-business bully" when he admonished a group of business people that they owed part of their success to others who helped create "this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive."⁸⁰ Just as the schoolyard bully would deprive other students of their lunch money, so the anti-business bully would deprive successful business people of credit for their own achievements. Liberal claims about our social interconnectedness are merely the ideological weapons through which the bullying proceeds.

As these examples demonstrate, conservative claims of cultural oppression can turn *anything* into a cultural issue. Being merely the *mediums* through which these claims are articulated, the "issues" selected will vary according to a range of factors—including electoral politics, economic trends, international developments, and others. Religion and morality are among the claimants' favorite topics. But their claims of cultural oppression are defined, not by their contingent subject matter, but by a set of objectives, a mode of analysis, and above all a spirit of argument. Frank observes that conservatism is no longer concerned to defend "some established order of things." Instead, it "accuses, it rants, it points out hypocrisies and gleefully pounces on contradictions."⁸¹ It is this glee and impish delight, this sense of oneself as the perspicacious outsider speaking truth to power that defines the conservative claimant of cultural oppression. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are a form of political and intellectual

⁷⁸ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/379481/why-team-obama-was-blindsided-bergdahl-backlash-ralph-peters>

⁷⁹ Goldberg, *Tyranny of Cliches*, pg. 203.

⁸⁰ Shapiro, *Bullies*, pg. 156.

⁸¹ Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, pg. 119.

judo. They seek, not to resist liberalism directly, but to redirect the prestige of liberalism against liberalism itself, to “pull the rug” out from under liberalism in the most brazen of fashions. With impish delight, the claimants undertake the ultimate *political chutzpah* of stepping without invitation or permission into the shoes of the very people they stand accused of oppressing, at the same instant thrusting liberals into the shoes of the oppressors. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are an agenda of political revenge.

This does not characterize all contemporary conservative thought in equal measure, of course. Kimball, who describes conservatives as merely *losers*, is not a paradigmatic conservative claimant of cultural oppression. And as with any political credo, distinctions must be made between the sophisticated theoreticians and the doctrine’s mass vulgarization. On the other hand, the continuities which survive those distinctions cannot be ignored. As we saw, Kimball’s diagnosis that “we are all liberals now” is fully consistent with the spirit of conservative claims of cultural oppression, even if Kimball doesn’t personally claim cultural oppression. And while high theory must be distinguished from practical end-product, it is a fundamental axiom of conservative high theory that theories be evaluated in terms of their end-product. The Marxism condemned by conservatives is the Marxism of gulags and mass famines, not the Marxism of air-conditioned graduate seminars, and they will not permit leftists to take refuge from the former in the latter. But then it is only fitting that conservatives too be compelled to recognize the facts on the ground, and those facts are conservative claims of cultural oppression. If conservatism is to be defended, it must be defended in the shape which it has now assumed and indeed *had* to assume given what conservatives of all stripes agree is the cultural and rhetorical triumph of the Left.

4. Preliminary Questions

What are we to make of this dislocation in ideological space? One common liberal refrain is that whatever vitriol and demonization may be discerned on the Left can likewise be discovered on the Right, where they originated and are most egregious. If the old rules of civility have gone by the wayside, then conservatives have only themselves to blame. “Who started it?” is a question about which liberals and conservatives will naturally disagree. The symmetry in antipathy ends there, however. Liberals may condemn conservatives’ caricatures of them as offensive and pernicious. But they are also disposed to dismiss these as just politics, or else as the usual conservative stupidity, or perhaps as sad commentary on conservatism’s state of intellectual disrepair. By contrast, conservative claims of cultural oppression involve a degree of personal resentment that is not dissolved by such sociological explanations. Liberals and conservatives may both be given to political incivility, but the other side’s incivility represents very different things to each.

Disclosing his motivations for writing *Liberal Fascism*, which argues that modern liberalism and fascism grew out of the same intellectual roots in early twentieth-century progressivism, Goldberg recounts that “[e]ver since I joined the public conversation as a conservative writer, I’ve been called a fascist and a Nazi by smug, liberal know-nothings, sublimely confident of their ill-informed prejudices.”⁸² Liberals will dismiss the ad hominem attacks of conservatives as too contrived and ridiculous to warrant serious, protracted offense. By contrast, liberals’ ad hominems strike conservatives as eminently sincere—“sublimely confident” as Goldberg says. Not being shrugged off with the same ease, they instead provoke formal, book-length rebuttals.

In a similar vein, Anderson notes that it is an “ugly habit of left-liberal political argument to dismiss conservative ideas as if they don’t deserve a hearing, and to redefine mainstream conservative views as extremism and bigotry.” This is an “annihilating gesture,” Anderson says.⁸³ But it is difficult to imagine liberals responding in the same way to conservatives who portray them as extremists—by questioning their patriotism, for example. Racial epithets may qualify as annihilating gestures. But the charge will strike liberals as rather melodramatic in the context of ideological disagreement, however heated it has become. If conservatives dismiss certain left-liberal ideas as unworthy of a hearing, then this is as liberals see it just testimony to conservatives’ dogmatism and anti-intellectualism, and nothing by virtue of which they should feel “annihilated.” To the extent liberals become outraged by conservatives, they are outraged more at what they judge to be conservative obtuseness than by whatever offense is being given. There is an outrage, not of resentment and embitterment, but of contempt, exasperation, and indignation at the moral and intellectual irresponsibility of conservatives. Rhetorical dishonesty can perhaps be discovered on all sides. But whereas the rhetorical dishonesty of conservatives is an offense against effective democratic deliberation and other generally esteemed principles, the rhetorical dishonesty of liberals is an offense against, well, *conservatives*.

It is also difficult to imagine two young liberals setting out to write a book whose primary aim was to refute the false stereotypes which conservatives perpetuate against them. Yet young conservatives Brent Joshpe and S.E. Cupp judged it fitting and timely to author *Why You’re Wrong About The Right*, a “book about the trials and tribulations of being young, conservative, and misunderstood.”⁸⁴ As a young Republican living in New York City, Cupp felt like a pariah, like the “the ex-con who just moved across the street from the elementary school, or the punk rocker who rented the place above yours, or the weird old

⁸² Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pg. 392.

⁸³ Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, pgs. 17-18.

⁸⁴ Cupp and Joshpe, *Why You’re Wrong about the Right*, pg. 242.

lady who throws rocks off her porch and has long conversations with a broom handle.”⁸⁵ So she and Joshpe set out to systematically rebut the popular prejudice that Republicans are “racist, misogynistic, homophobic, closed-minded, fanatical, stupid, redneck, elitist, uncaring, uncharitable, prudish, and most offensively, unfunny.”⁸⁶ Popular culture celebrates liberals as cosmopolitan, debonair, and edgy⁸⁷ while stereotyping conservatives as humorless, uptight, and stiff.⁸⁸ And the authors hoped that their barbs and witticisms would give the lie to these stereotypes.

Liberals do not appear to be similarly oppressed by conservative stereotypes of them, however. Those residing in conservative regions of the country are more likely to bask in their outsider status than complain of it, seeing themselves more as visitors to a zoo than as stigmatized ex-cons. Liberal linguistics professor Geoffrey Nunberg did write a book titled *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left-Wing Freak Show*. But the goal here was not to *refute* the stereotypes and thereby vindicate liberals. On the contrary, the absurdity of the stereotypes was taken as a given, and the point was rather to explain how our political vocabulary has been manipulated to create the stereotypes. This comparison may be a bit unfair given that Cupp and Joshpe can be intentionally hyperbolic for humorous effect. Nevertheless, there is broad evidence that liberals enjoy a significant measure of theoretical detachment vis-à-vis their deprecation by conservatives that conservatives do *not* enjoy vis-à-vis their deprecation by liberals. Where conservatives may respond to their deprecation with personal resentment, liberals respond only with bemusement or at most exasperation. That conservatives are more disposed to personalize political conflict is confirmed in Nunberg’s finding that conservatives are statistically more likely to say “you liberals” than liberals are to say “you conservatives.”⁸⁹

What are we to make of this asymmetry? The received wisdom of liberals is that conservatives are more offended because they are more narcissistic and histrionic, inhabiting a self-enclosed, self-reinforcing hallucinatory world built on selective perception and confirmation bias. Whatever personal resentment is incited by liberal rhetoric, then, reveals that this rhetoric is largely accurate. It stings because it is true. Correlatively, the comparative detachment of liberals in the face of conservative ad hominem confirms the latter’s absurdity. Liberals do not take them seriously because they are not as a matter of fact serious.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pg. xiv.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pg. xvi.

⁸⁷ Ibid. pg. 89.

⁸⁸ Ibid. pg. 22.

⁸⁹ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 4.

The other explanation, however, is that conservatives are indeed culturally oppressed, whatever this turns out to mean exactly. If the ad hominem of liberals sting as the ad hominem of conservatives do not, this might be because the former draw power from cultural orthodoxy while the latter run counter to it. This would be why liberals enjoy a “sublime confidence” unattainable by conservatives. Here is the difference between being called a “honky” and being called a “nigger.” Both are derogatory racial epithets. But history and the society in which history is sedimented lend the latter epithet a special force that the dominant group never confronts. Likewise perhaps with liberals and conservatives. If liberals cannot readily perceive the savage incivility they stand accused of meting out daily, this is only to be expected of the dominant dispensation, which has naturalized its own prerogatives as the invisible, taken-for-granted background of things. What liberals dismiss as conservative histrionics would then bespeak conservatives’ outsider insight into the “subterranean” of liberalism, the subtle, largely unconscious conservaphobic micro-aggressions that liberals have the privilege of denying.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression have been noticed many times before. Hardly a passing political fad, they have been with us for many years and will surely endure in one form or another into the foreseeable future. The response from the Left has always been to dismiss them as politically expedient rabble rousing or, to the extent they are sincere, as immature identity politics betokening the contemporary decadence of conservative thought. And indeed, liberals can scarcely be faulted for relishing the irony that those who have attacked so many others for “playing the victim” should then find themselves powerfully attracted to that role. But all irony aside, there remains an intellectually serious question about whether there is a wheat to be separated from the chaff, about whether there is some philosophical coherence, or even profundity, underneath what liberals dismiss as conservatives’ patent vapidness. Perhaps conservatives intuit something they simply cannot articulate, not because they are dimwitted, but because whatever they sense is intrinsically recalcitrant to cogent exposition. As the adage goes, just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.

If conservative claims of cultural oppression strike liberals as fundamentally disingenuous, one reason is that they seem to overlook the *intellectual* nature of liberals’ anti-conservative hostility. Conservative commentator Mike Gallagher complains that even if ideologically slanted left-wing curriculums occasionally deign to include conservative thinkers, those thinkers will invariably be taught by liberals who detest their ideas. This does conservatives no good because “[l]etting Paul Krugman teach Milton Friedman is like having David Duke teach African-American studies.”⁹⁰ But it seems like a

⁹⁰ Mike Gallagher, *50 Things Liberals Love to Hate* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2012), pg. 141.

transparent category error to transpose norms that properly apply to morally neutral and intellectually contentless traits like skin pigmentation onto the context of political ideology. It may be conceded to Gallagher that there is a difference between being taught Milton Friedman by Paul Krugman and being taught Milton Friedman by a sympathetic libertarian. Perhaps the latter can provide a perspective that the former cannot. But whatever “bias” a Krugman might have against a Friedman is an *intellectual* bias and cannot be compared to a former Klansman’s animus against African-Americans.

It is this intellectual dimension of liberal “conservaphobia” that conservatives seem to willfully ignore in their various attempts to portray liberalism as the last socially acceptable form of intolerance and bigotry. Lamenting the discrimination conservatives face in Hollywood, conservative novelist and screenwriter Andrew Klaven complains “it’s as if you were a woman trying to sell a screenplay and you walked into a room and the guy started making sexist, filthy remarks.”⁹¹ But clearly, hostility to conservatism is not morally or intellectually equivalent to a visceral misogyny. Misogynists do not “disagree” with womanhood in the way liberals disagree with conservatism. Conservatives would admonish liberals to disagree without being disagreeable. But whatever disagreeableness liberals may evince originates in legitimate political disagreement, as “sexist, filthy remarks” do not.

Hannity was outraged that a nationally syndicated columnist should have devoted an entire column to arguing “Why Conservatives Don’t Deserve Respect.” “[N]o matter how smart or literate or successful they are,” they “do not deserve cultural affirmation” argued the columnist⁹² But what precisely is this “cultural affirmation” that Hannity believes is being illegitimately withheld? The problem cannot be that liberals have the temerity to *disagree* with conservatives. The intelligence, literacy, or success of conservatives can provide no protection on this front. Is the problem then that liberals refuse to “take seriously” conservative ideas? But why exactly are they obligated to do so? Frank wouldn’t provide his fellow Kansans with “cultural affirmation” because he judged that their political priorities were so unreasonable when taken at face value that they had to be taken otherwise. Liberals are not alone in reaching such conclusions, and, contra Scarborough, it should be possible to do so without being compared to hooligans calling for Barack Obama’s death. Social commentators are under no moral obligation to take their subject matter at “face value,” and this is scarcely an obligation that conservatives would be prepared to impose on themselves.

However, these contradictions only establish that conservative claims of cultural oppression as ordinarily formulated can be facile. They do not eliminate the possibility of a more sophisticated

⁹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpE4YdhdNE0>

⁹² Hannity, *Let Freedom Ring*, pg. 231.

framework that recognizes the obvious differences between a liberal conservaphobia and more traditional bigotries while also identifying morally and psychologically relevant parallels. Liberal disdain for conservatism can be cast in purely intellectual terms, as disdain for conservative ideas and only derivatively for those who see fit to hold them. But might liberal attitudes not also involve something more visceral, something that can assume the form of intellectual judgment but is ultimately irreducible to it? If conservatives may be accused of racism for suggesting that African-Americans are drawn to black nationalism as sour-grapes emotional compensation for socio-economic underachievement, then liberals can be scrutinized in analogous terms when they level an analogous charge at working-class Kansans. Nunberg observes that Democratic criticism of Republican ideas will now be dismissed as “hate speech,”⁹³ which seems like a disingenuous caricature of liberal *criticism*. But if liberals are prepared to medicalize as homophobia what traditionalists hold out as their principled moral opposition to homosexuality, then conservatives can follow suit and respond with the same skepticism to liberals’ own avowals of principled disagreement.

The comparison between *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* and calls for the assassination of Barack Obama does seem like a stretch. But few dispute that racial prejudice can, and indeed has, assumed more genteel and intellectualized forms than the cross-burning, black-lynching Klansman. And so we cannot dismiss the possibility that “conservaphobia” is an *inherently* sophisticated and intellectualized bigotry that for this very reason cannot be readily recognized as such. Conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe they see through the sophistication and intellectualization, and seek a vocabulary through which their insight might be broadcast to the world. Just as critical race theorists argue that “not being black” is intrinsic to the social definition of whiteness and radical feminists maintain that “not being female” is integral to that of maleness, so the claimants insist that liberalism is now defined by anti-conservative animus. Perhaps liberalism must no less than the racism, sexism, and homophobia it denounces define itself in opposition to an *Other*, a role now assumed by conservatives. A liberal conservaphobia, if it exists, would have to be an exponentially more complex creature than the traditional bigotries, something that somehow blurs the distinction between the intellectual and the visceral, a complicated amalgam of rational and irrational elements, and so a phenomenon fraught with profound moral ambiguity in a way that racism, sexism, and homophobia are not. *This*, and not their inherent irrationality, may be the reason why conservative claims of cultural oppression have thus far resisted rational exposition.

⁹³ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 151.

Chapter Two

The Anatomy of a Worldview

This exposition is our goal. But we are not yet in a position to execute it. For the charge of conservaphobia is intimately bound up with an elaborate narrative about the state of American culture and society and can only be fairly assessed in this context. In this chapter, I will examine the basic contours of that narrative, conservatives' general sense of the forces confronting them—how they emerged, what they seek, and how they persevere in being. Whether conservative claims of cultural oppression represent the cheapest form of identity politics or else harbor some hidden profundity very much depends on what we make of this narrative. Though the themes I shall now outline may not speak to every conservative in equal measure, they are recurring features of our cultural landscape and draw upon the same webs of resonance. These must be understood before we can translate conservatives' visceral sense of oppression into clear philosophical questions. As in the preceding chapter, I will proceed with an attitude of fascinated agnosticism. While this investigation must eventually move beyond agnosticism, such is initially needed to gain a grip on a discourse whose nuances complexities are overlooked by proponents and detractors alike.

1. The Vision of the Anointed

Conservatives understand themselves to be culturally oppressed, not only because of their conservative philosophy, but also because of their concrete resistance to a set of profound cultural transformations of which liberals are the champions and beneficiaries. If these transformations go unrecognized by many, this is because we suffer from a certain historical amnesia and false consciousness that conceal the true nature of liberalism. Conservative claims of cultural oppression seek to overturn this state of affairs and thereby liberate conservatives and the wider society from this oblivion.

Different conservatives will characterize these cultural transformations in different ways. But most agree that they originated in the social, political, and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and the subsequent mainstreaming of what were formerly fringe tendencies in American society. Roger Kimball's rendition is illustrative. Many would define the 1960s in terms of major points of conflict like the Vietnam War and civil rights. But for Kimball, the ostensible political issues of the 1960s "were mere rallying points

for a revolution in sensibility.”¹ The issue was not specific rights and wrongs but an entire way of life, the American way of life, “with its social and political institutions, its moral assumptions, its unspoken confidences about what mattered.”² The Left promised to replace these unspoken confidences with grander emancipatory ideals. But this emancipation proved to be fraudulent, just the symptom of a generation’s emotional adolescence. Oblivious to the social foundations of its own prosperity and privilege, this generation turned against these out of narcissistic self-infatuation, cloaking its egoism and self-indulgent alienation in the mantle of leftist ideology. While the 1960s were lauded for the idealism of its youth, that idealism was merely the surrender of the intellect to undiscerning, unrestrained passion. The decade thus left American in a moral void, as “[d]istinctions between high and low, good and bad, noble and base, were suddenly rendered otiose, besides the point.”³ What purported to be idealism was in fact narcissism, an “insatiable greed for the *emotion* of virtue which makes the actual practice of virtue seem superfluous and elevates self-infatuation into a prime spiritual imperative.”⁴

The Age of Aquarius is officially over. But it continues to live on more insidiously than ever “in our values and habits, in our tastes, pleasures, and aspirations,” and especially so “in our educational and cultural institutions, and in the degraded pop culture that permeates our lives like a corrosive fog.”⁵ The long hair and bell-bottoms may have gone out of fashion. But these were mere props, mere symbols heralding what would eventually become the “ultimate institutionalization of immoralist radicalism,” the institutionalization of “drugs, pseudo-spirituality, promiscuous sex, virulent anti-Americanism, naïve anti-capitalism, and the precipitous decline of artistic and intellectual standards.”⁶ The political revolution envisioned by the radicals could never truly succeed in a democratic society with free elections. So the revolutionary spirit had to become channeled into our cultural life, where it now achieves its ends in institutions rather than on the streets, by eroding values rather than toppling regimes, by incremental infiltration rather than direct confrontation.

That many Americans cannot see this revolution only testifies to its success. “[H]aving changed ourselves,” writes Kimball, “we no longer perceive the extent of our transformation.”⁷ The radicals fretted endlessly about the perils of cooptation. But it was they who finally coopted the establishment. While

¹ Roger Kimball, *The Long March: How the Culture Revolution of the 1960s Changed America* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), pg. 102.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 129.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 82.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 250.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 7.

the radicalism may seem passe, this is only because its precepts have become unconscious reflexes, incorporated into “the realm of habit, taste, and feeling, becoming along the way not only ideas that are espoused but also a way of life.”⁸ This is the form in which 1960s radicalism becomes truly insidious, not as an explicit ideology, but as a set of attitudes that are most keenly after their more radical ideological formulations have been disavowed. Having become subterranean, the ideology can no longer be confronted as such, which is what allows for a “censorship of fashion.”

Liberalism accrued its present prestige through its opposition to what we now recognize as obvious evils, like Jim Crow. But conservatives believe that liberalism’s historic moral victories obscure the true nature of its contemporary agenda. For in capitulating to the radicals, the weak-kneed liberalism of the 1960s incorporated their radicalism into itself, and now advances a vision very different from the true spirit of the civil rights movement—whose rectitude ordinary Americans have come to appreciate. While the liberal elites present themselves as defending uncontroversial democratic ideals, they are in fact exploiting the prestige of these ideals to advance their parochial cultural predilections as taken-for-granted common sense. And their new common sense consists in the systematic inversion of all the values held dear by the largely powerless and often voiceless ordinary American: the replacing of competition and “standards” by bureaucratic intervention and social engineering, of patriotism by multiculturalism or anti-Americanism, of capitalism by environmentalism or socialism, and of traditional morality by sexual libertinism or feminism. The elites may present themselves as public-minded pragmatists, but they are actually driven by a perverse will to effectuate these inversions.

Conservatives believe that contemporary liberalism is defined by an ethos that is culturally and morally “thicker” than liberals’ avowed principles would indicate. Hence what some conservatives call the “mass bohemianization” of society. Today’s cultural liberalism, writes Dinesh D’Souza, is “the final product of a progressive, century-long effort by a small minority of discontented bohemians to impose their values upon the wider society.”⁹ Gertrude Himmelfarb notes that the original bohemians saw their way of life as “appropriate for only a select few, those superior souls capable of throwing off the shackles of bourgeois convention.”¹⁰ Far from seeking to proselytize the world to their free-spiritedness, they viewed themselves as exceptional people whose singular spiritual independence was beyond the reach of

⁸ Ibid., pg. 222.

⁹ Dinesh D’Souza, *The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and its Responsibility for 9/11* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), pg. 167.

¹⁰ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York, Vintage Books, 1994), pg. 206.

the masses.¹¹ But with the democratization of bohemia, what was once a subculture and curiosity has become the dominant culture and orthodoxy. The immoralism that was previously a hobby of academicians and bohemians has mutated into a corrosive social nihilism that attacks the very foundations of the American spirit.

Liberals understand the evolution of their creed as a progressive overcoming of the prejudices and blind spots that formerly impeded the fullest realization of liberalism's highest ideals. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression see only the replacement of some prejudices by others, not the purification of liberalism but its colonization by a parochial sensibility and interest group. "Modern" liberalism—sometimes called "ultra-liberalism"—is not the final fulfillment of some original promise laying at the core of the American project, but an ideologized perversion of the authentic, classical liberalism bequeathed to us by the founding generation. It is the cancerous overreaching of certain liberal tendencies, which, though laudable when shaped and constrained by traditional values, become pernicious and corrosive once unhinged from these. Thus, Michael McConnell argues that contemporary liberalism undermines the classical liberal virtues of individualism, independence, and rationality by perverting them into selfishness, pride, skepticism, and nihilism. For these are what individualism, independence, and rationality must devolve into once uprooted from their moorings in religious piety and moral discipline, the historical context in which they originally developed.

If modern liberalism can appear like the ineluctable outgrowth of "progress," this is only because it has beguiled us into seeing the past through a certain lens. It is only as a consequence of liberalism's recent perversion, says McConnell, that traditional religion is now condemned as per se authoritarian, irrational, and divisive.¹² Modern liberals' misunderstanding of traditional religion is a symptom of their own *self*-misunderstanding, the delusion that their virtues are the genuine articles when they are actually degraded editions. It is this false consciousness that propels liberals to dismiss the better part of American history as a kind of Dark Ages that is now being brought to a close by a liberal Enlightenment and Renaissance. But this is pure ideology, insist conservatives. If the "unspoken confidences" overturned by the 60s now seem outrageously repressive and illiberal, this is only because the new dispensation has *trained* us to so view them. Here as elsewhere, history is written by the victors and for the victors, who refuse to acknowledge their victory as indeed *their* victory.

¹¹ Ibid. pgs. 217-218.

¹² Michael McConnell, *"God is Dead and We Have Killed Him!": Freedom of Religion in the Post-modern Age*, 1993 B.Y.U.L. Rev. 163, 172-73 (1993).

If conservatives are not only the losers but moreover the victims, this is because the new dispensation represents a new social identity that is not fully captured by the traditional Left-Right spectrum. Lee Harris writes that the “cultural clash between the populist conservatives and the cognitive elite that is hell-bent on enlightening them” is a “division that is rapidly replacing the old distinctions of liberal and conservative, left and right, Republican and Democrat.”¹³ Whereas these older political categories presupposed that intelligent people could disagree politically, the new “cognitive elites” of liberalism display “a disdainful contempt for those who disagree with them,” the “crude intellectual snobbery of the schoolboy with the high IQ, who loves to torment his inferiors by scoffing at their dullness.”¹⁴ David Gelernter explains that “[o]ld-time left-wingers and right-wingers despised each other but recognized that they were comparable species, two points on a spectrum, with ‘the center’ in between.” They were “old troopers who used to compete for the same Vaudeville booking.” By contrast, the “Airhead leftists” of today “know nothing of any political spectrum.” Not content to defend their beliefs as true and critique conservative beliefs as false, they rather “classify themselves as rational and their opponents as irrational—buffoons like George Bush, Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann, or thugs like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld,” defining themselves as “the center, the responsible mainstream, the only sane place to be.” This asymmetry—the liberal elites’ reflexive dismissiveness toward opposing views that finds no counterpart on the right—is now “the fundamental fact of political life.”¹⁵

Gelernter views this asymmetry as one more legacy of the despised 1960s. The now overthrown WASP establishment “saw itself as the nation’s high end, the top of a vertical spectrum.” But the new ruling class of “PORGI”—post-religious, globalist intellectuals—see themselves “as separated by a cultural Grand Canyon from the nation at large, with Harvard and the New York Times and the Boston Symphony and science and technology and iPhones and organic truffled latte on their side—and guns, churches and NASCAR on the other.” This has spawned a new repressiveness and intolerance. The old WASP establishment “saw the future as a long process of nudging uncivilized Americans upward gently, gently through the WASPness spectrum.” This was smug and patronizing, to be sure. But it was benign by comparison with the ruthlessness of the PORGI establishment. Having abandoned the last vestiges of WASP gentility, that establishment now “sees a future of hoisting people aloft and swinging them—via the great crane of the PORGIified schools and universities—from Reactionary Ridge on the far side of the

¹³ Lee Harris, *The Next American Civil War: The Populist Revolt Against the Liberal Elite* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pg. 86.

¹⁴

¹⁵ David Gelernter, *America-Lite: How Imperial Academia Dismantled Our Culture (and Ushered In the Obamacrats)* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), pg. 128-29.

canyon all the way to PORGI Paradise.” Being Manichean in outlook, the liberal elites prosecute a ruthless culture war and will not be appeased until every last reactionary has been exposed and reeducated.¹⁶

As a defender of upward mobility, this new elite is superficially democratic. But underneath this facade it institutes a new hierarchy more insidious than any before. The WASPs accepted that not everyone could live up to their standards. But those who resist induction into liberalism are seen as resisting reason itself, and are treated accordingly. The 1960s revolution did not initiate some generic liberation from which all benefited, but merely supplanted one culturally parochial dispensation with another. Far from eliminating hierarchy, it merely *intellectualized* it. An aristocratic regime of smugness and patronization was replaced by a Jacobin one of intolerance and demonization—and with conservatives as the target.

If the classic WASP social hierarchy revolved around perceived differences in things like moral cleanliness, social refinement, ethnic bona fides, and religious affiliation, the new hierarchy of ultra-liberalism separates those who possess “awareness” and those who lack it. It is the ultimate fulfillment of what Thomas Sowell calls “the vision of the anointed”:

...those who disagree with the prevailing vision are seen as being not merely in error, but in sin. For those who have this vision of the world, the anointed and the benighted do not argue on the same moral plane or play by the same cold rules of logic and evidence. The benighted are to be made ‘aware,’ to have their ‘consciousness raised,’ and the wistful hope is held out that they will ‘grow.’ Should the benighted prove recalcitrant, however, then their ‘mean-spiritedness’ must be fought and the ‘real reasons’ behind their arguments and actions exposed. While verbal fashions change, this basic picture of the differential rectitude of the anointed and the benighted has not changed fundamentally in at least two hundred years.¹⁷

The class struggle for conservatives isn’t between the haves and the have-nots, but between the anointed and the benighted, between the would-be know-it-alls and the alleged know-nothings. The vision of the anointed never announces itself officially. But it informs liberals’ conviction that they have a special role in the world and perceive truths that less evolved souls cannot. This is a vision of “differential rectitude” which has “become inextricably intertwined with the egos of those who believe it.” It is not “simply a vision of the world and its functioning in a causal sense, but also a vision of themselves and of their moral role in that world.”¹⁸

Whatever the controversy at hand, the lesson for the anointed is always that conservatives are unthinking, servile to custom, beholden to unconscious prejudices and hostilities, and simply lack the

¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 27.

¹⁷ Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (Basic Books 1995), pg. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid. pag. 5.

intellectual and emotional maturity to arrive at liberal conclusions. The “cognitive elites,” argues Harris, cannot entertain opposing arguments because “they do not see them as arguments in the first place.” They therefore dismiss the fears and grievances of conservatives as “prejudices that have been programmed into them, requiring not logical rebuttal but open derision.”¹⁹ Angelo Codevilla observes that “the notion that the common people’s words are, like grunts, mere signs of pain, pleasure, and frustration, is now axiomatic among our Ruling Class.”²⁰ However the point is put, conservatives believe that the liberal identity is now inextricably bound up with an ingrained social reflex to dismiss conservative ideas as epiphenomena of forces that liberals alone can recognize. The speech of conservatives is not to be argued with, but only conditioned and disciplined away. This is not a conclusion of liberal reason but the premise of liberal identity, which can only thrive at the expense of conservatives.

Liberals may not see themselves in this nefarious light. But the vision of the anointed has all the same been built into their basic sense of themselves. Proudly proclaiming his liberalism, radio talk show host Garrison Keiller explains:

I am a liberal, and liberalism is the politics of kindness. Liberals stand for tolerance, magnanimity, community spirit, the defense of the weak against the powerful, love of learning, freedom of belief, art and poetry, city life, the very things that make America worth dying for.²¹

The traditional Left-Right spectrum has collapsed because liberalism can no longer see itself as just a point of view, symmetrical with conservatism, on how to reconcile certain potentially conflicting social values. For with liberalism having been defined in Keiller’s grandiose terms, anyone who would oppose it *must* be pathologized as obtusely hostile to all that is good, true, and beautiful, and so as someone whose arguments cannot be accepted at face value. Young conservative Robin Denbroff recalls a casual debate she had about public school sex education with a group of liberals at a party. The discussion “had been whirling along, each of us weighing the alternative view and responding (for the most part) with sensitivity and respect.” But then she revealed that she had been home-schooled, at which point her credibility instantly dissipated. The liberals concluded that if she had been homeschooled, then she likely had conservative parents, and so grew up indoctrinated with Republican propaganda. Her opinion was reduced to the “incurably biased but inevitable result of my upbringing.” And so her arguments instantly

¹⁹ Harris, *Next American Civil War*, pg. 86-87.

²⁰Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Ruling Class: How They Corrupted America and What We Can Do About It* (Beauford Books 2010), pgs. 20-21.

²¹Qt. in Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), pg. 296.

became irrelevant, “dismissed as if they were the unthinking repetitions of a child.”²² Liberals who would not commit the genetic fallacy in other contexts will indulge it in their dealings with conservatives, epistemic second-class citizens who cannot escape the accidents of their socialization. Whereas liberals operate in the space of reasons, conservatives operate in the space of causes, driven on by forces that only liberals properly understand. This is what Keiller’s “love of learning” means in *concrete practice*.

While the vision of the anointed requires the reflexive dismissal of the benighted, it is also parasitic on what it dismisses. Liberals’ hostility to conservatism is not merely a logical consequence of strongly held convictions but rather the psychological wellspring of those convictions. This means that the hostility must always be cultivated and fed, adapted to whatever targets are available. Hence the agenda of systematic inversion described above, which culminates in an unintelligible bizarro world where up is down and down is up, where what was normal is now deviant and what was deviant is now normal. The “kind of family that has been regarded for centuries as natural and normal,” complains Himmelfarb, is “now seen as pathological, concealing behind the façade of respectability the new ‘original sin’ of child abuse.” In the same spirit of systematic inversion, “smoking has been elevated to the rank of vice and sin, while sexual promiscuity is tolerated as a matter of individual right and choice.” At the same time, rape has ironically been “defined up” to include “date rape”—sexual activity “which participants themselves at the time might not have perceived as rape.”²³ The anointed reject the common sense of the benighted because its very commonness is an affront to their identity, which requires them to systematically invert every inherited norm and understanding. Their identity presupposes a world that *resists* their prescriptions, a world too benighted to recognize their superior wisdom and morality—and thus all the more in need of them. Whether the issue is the rights of criminals or the merits of avant-garde art, there is, writes Sowell, always a “pattern of seeking differentiation at virtually all costs.”²⁴ Amorphous abstractions like the “politics of kindness,” “community spirit,” and “love of learning” permit just this, because they can always be reconfigured so as to create a new chasm between the anointed and the benighted. Liberals are always “moving the goal post,” say conservatives.

Since the vision of the anointed can at most enjoy the passive acquiescence, and never the lucid assent, of the great majority, it must be promoted and defended by an unaccountable intellectual class. Having captured America’s most influential institutions, including the media, Hollywood, the universities, public education, foundations, government bureaucracies, and, most importantly, the courts, the liberal

²² Robin A. Dembroff, “The Conservative Gene,” in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010), pg. 23.

²³ Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures*, pg. 28.

²⁴ Sowell, *Vision of the Anointed*, pg. 248.

elites employ their privileged position to soist their parochial values upon a silent and largely powerless majority of ordinary Americans. Even where democracy has not been legally disabled by the courts and the administrative state, this residue of freedom comes too late when inform coercion can achieve unofficially whatever cannot be achieved officially.

Considers consider this agenda to be greater than the sum of its parts. Where liberals see discrete policy problems with discrete solutions, conservatives see localized manifestations of the vision of the anointed, mere “rallying points for a revolution in sensibilities.” Nunberg observes:

Since the late 1960s, the right’s appeals have rested on a collection of overlapping stories about the currents of contemporary American life—stories that illustrate declining patriotism and moral standards, the out-of-touch media and the self-righteous liberal elite, the feminization of public life, minorities demanding special privileges and unwilling to assimilate to American culture and language, growing crime and lenient judges, ludicrous restrictions on permissible speech, disrespect for religious faith, a swollen government that intrudes officiously in private life, and arching over all of them, an America divided into two nations by differences in values, culture, and lifestyle.²⁵

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression see these various issues, not as clearly delineated controversies governed by their own internal norms, but as different arenas for the playing out of the same basic struggle between the anointed and the benighted. The elites may hold themselves out as post-ideological technocrats. But conservatives believe that this is a disingenuous gambit to distract from the broader cultural landscape that is being incrementally transformed through what purport to be isolated acts of problem-solving and conflict-resolution. For the ultimate effect of these “solutions” is always to augment the symbolic prestige of liberalism, which conservatives must at every step resist. Given that every controversy is defined by the same basic divisions, victory in any one of them provides the victor with momentum and confidence that can be carried forth into the next battle. And so conservatives cannot restrict their attention to the clearly-identifiable, concrete outcomes of particular policy decisions, because each such decision must also be assessed in terms of its incremental effect on the broader struggle, on the general balance of power between the anointed and the benighted. To concede anything to liberals is also to concede a portion of their power to resist further concessions, which is what the anointed are always trying to extract.

The vision of the anointed is the reason why conservative claims of cultural oppression refuse to recognize a genuine distinction between “liberalism” and movements further to the Left whose self-professed adherents would insistently distinguish themselves from liberals. Offering the perspective of

²⁵ Geoffrey Nunberg, *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left Wing Freak Show* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), pg. 35.

“the left,” Brown and Halley explain that liberalism (in the broad non-partisan sense that encompasses both “liberals” and “conservatives” but excludes monarchists) begins by presuming “the legitimacy of a state in which we are guaranteed equality before the law and in which individual liberty is paramount” and then seeks “an order in which this equality and this freedom are maximized to the point where they would begin to cancel one another.” Free-market conservatives are most concerned with maximizing freedom whilst “liberals” attach more importance to equality and will “wield the state on behalf of those on the lower end of various social hierarchies or at the losing end of various maldistributions.” Nevertheless, the difference between contemporary liberals and conservatives is only one of degree and emphasis. Both accept the framework of classical liberalism. By contrast, the Left does not accept the legitimacy of the liberal state as a given and instead takes up its analysis at the level of “the *social powers* producing and stratifying subjects that liberalism largely ignores.” These social powers include “capital, male dominance, racial formations, and regimes of sexuality.” And so unlike liberalism, the Left will critique “norms regulating a great variety of social relations, including but not limited to class, gender, sexuality, and race.”²⁶

But where leftists drawn a sharp line between themselves and liberalism writ large, dismissing differences between “liberals” and “conservatives” as trifling ones of degree, conservatives draw the sharp line between themselves and *both* “liberals” and “leftists,” dismissing *their* differences as trifling ones of degree. Liberals and leftists may proceed from different philosophical starting points. But they both end up in the same place. For liberals’ concern with “substantive” equality inevitably draws them into the traditional spheres of leftist concern, at which they become no less willing to deploy state power to meddle with a wide array of social practices. Given that the “various maldistributions” which concern liberals are only another name for what leftists call “social powers,” what are first presented as limited correctives to isolated “kinks in the system” harbor the seeds of totalitarianism. Liberals may demand nothing more than a “level playing field.” But since there will always be another previously undetected “maldistribution” waiting to be “discovered” by the anointed, liberalism must inevitably devolve into leftism. This is why conservative claims of cultural oppression sometimes speak of “left-liberalism” or employ “liberalism” and “the left” interchangeably.

Richard Hofstadter observes that the fundamentalist mind “looks upon the world as an arena of conflict between absolute good and absolute evil,” and “cannot find serious importance in what it believes to be trifling degrees of difference: liberals support measures that are for all practical purposes socialistic,

²⁶ Wendy Brown and Janet Halley, *Introduction, in Left Legalsim/Left Critique*, eds. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (Duke University Press, 2002), pgs. 5-7.

and socialism is nothing more than a variant of Communism, which as everyone knows, is atheism.”²⁷ But what liberals condemn as unthinking Manicheism follows logically from conservatives’ understanding of modern American history. Given the erosion of liberalism’s traditional foundations in the “unspoken confidences” of a God-fearing and freedom-loving people, contemporary liberalism has become fused with various alien influences, including Marxism, anti-bourgeois romanticism, anti-clericalism, Nietzschean amorality, and postmodernism. This fusion is never officially announced. But it is what permits the anointed to maintain a continuous chasm between themselves and the benighted. It is what explains liberals’ actual conduct and priorities, which are always to intervene against the “social powers” first identified by self-professed “leftists.” These alien influences may not have seduced every liberal in equal measure. But like the weak-kneed academic administrators of the 1960s who quickly capitulated to the student radicals occupying their offices, what few “sensible” or “old-fashioned” liberals remain lack the fortitude to forcefully oppose these currents—which are now challenged by conservatives alone.

2. The Dissident Culture

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression will be accused of playing the victim card. But they are more than willing to acknowledge that their own passivity and quiescence are no less to blame for their predicament than is liberals’ own ruthlessness. Codevilla notes that the “Country Class” of ordinary Americans was blinded by its egalitarian impulses to the fact that “a class of people was being carefully taught the contrary.”²⁸ Kahane laments that conservatives, unlike progressives, “tend to fight only when roused by intolerable provocation.” Most of the time, they prefer to “roll over and play dead.”²⁹ In the same vein, Shapiro observes that conservatives “tend to shy away from the fight”³⁰ and “typically back down” in the face of liberal bullying.³¹ Likewise, David Horowitz bemoans that conservative students have accepted left-wing classroom demagoguery as their lot. Being conservatives, “their disposition is to suffer” and so must be pushed “to see the injustice done them as injustice—and do something about it.”³² If conservatives’ claims to victimhood appear in tension with their professed opposition to the victim card,

²⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), pg. 135.

²⁸ Codevilla, *Ruling Class*, pg. 57.

²⁹ David Kahane, *Rules for Radical Conservatives: Beating the Left at Its Own Game to Take Back America* (Ballantine Books, 2010), pg. 268.

³⁰ Ben Shapiro, *Bullies: How the Left’s Culture of Fear and Intimidation Silences America* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2013), pg. 9.

³¹ *Ibid.* pg. 36.

³² *Qt.* in Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005), pg. 152.

this is as conservatives see it testimony to the depth of liberal encroachment, which has finally compelled them to draw a line in the sand and say “no more.” Given what Kirk called conservatives’ “congenital lethargy,”³³ the bare fact that they are finally being roused to action is itself strong evidence of the severity of the provocations and hence the justice of their cause. Thus understood, conservative claims of cultural oppression are long overdue exercises in assertiveness training. If liberals interpret this as aggression rather than self-defense, this is only because they have come to take conservative passivity for granted, as something conservatives owe them.

Conservatives’ sense of besiegement provides its own consolation, however, because it facilitates a heroic posture with a powerful existential appeal. Richard Ford observes that some multiculturalists of the Left set themselves in opposition to a white cultural monolith with hegemonic aspirations so that they may “fancy themselves a heroic *resistance*, keeping the flame of liberty alive against all odds.”³⁴ Conservatives have now adopted just this posture toward the cultural monolith of liberalism. The trope of resistance to hegemony, historically the purview of the Left, has now been appropriated by the Right. Having been ousted from their lofty perch as guardians of the old order and finding themselves in retreat, conservatives position themselves as dissenters, holdouts refusing to capitulate to the dominant paradigm and its armies of well-programmed liberal automatons. Conservatives believe that the prestige of traditional American values is badly damaged, perhaps irreparably so. Since liberal incursions against these values cannot be positively repulsed in the foreseeable future, they must simply hunker down and resign themselves to mere self-preservation. Robert Bork thus suggests that conservative talk radio and evangelical organizations may be the modern equivalents of the isolated Irish monasteries that safeguarded classical learning during the Dark Ages.³⁵

There is, says Himmelfarb argues, a morally conservative “dissident culture” that now stands in stubborn opposition to the morally libertarian “dominant culture.” Whereas the dominant culture is the heir to the counter-culture of the 1960s, the dissident culture represents a “counter-counterculture.”³⁶ As a dissident culture, conservatism is by definition in a position of weakness. The elites of the dissident culture “cannot begin to match, in numbers or influence, those who occupy the commanding heights of the dominant culture, such as professors, journalists, television and movie producers, and various cultural

³³ Russel Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (BN Publishing, 2008), pg.228.

³⁴ Richard Ford, *Racial Culture: A Critique* (Princeton University Press 2005), pg. 31.

³⁵ Robert H. Bork, *Slouching toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (Regan, 1996), pgs. 334-338.

³⁶ Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures*, pg. 124.

entrepreneurs.”³⁷ One might have expected religious institutions to be at the forefront of the resistance. But “priding themselves on being cosmopolitan and sophisticated, undogmatic and uncensorious,” the mainline churches have offered “little or no resistance” to the “prevailing culture.”³⁸ But all hope is not lost. For conservatives have engaged in various forms of “passive resistance,” as when parents home-school their children or send them to private religious schools, or when conservative foundations establish special centers, institutes, and programs as oases of moral traditionalism in a desert of liberalism. Students “seeking something other than an aggressively secular education” have “avail[ed] themselves of an ever expanding number of religious colleges.” And “despairing of the increasingly offensive fare on television,” some parents have begun to act “as their own regulators and censors,” encouraging “TV abstinence” just as their children commit themselves to “sexual abstinence.”³⁹ These practices will repel the onslaught of liberalism, but they do hold a candle to it, exploding its veneer of inevitability.

Himmelfarb’s examples suggest that the enclaves of the dissident culture offer localized recreations of the “unspoken confidences” that were once taken for granted. But many conservatives acknowledge that their dissident culture has itself become bohemianized. Susan Jacoby observes that “[t]o some degree, a vote for Nixon represented a vote for the silent majority’s concept of desirable family values and manners—for Pat Nixon’s good Republican cloth coat, for two dutiful daughters that dressed, looked, and spoke like the elder daughter in *Father Knows Best*.”⁴⁰ As heirs of the silent majority, conservative claimants of cultural oppression embrace traditional family values. On the other hand, they are also ambivalent about the imagery evoked by Jacoby and may dismiss it as yet another false stereotype that flatters liberals as their expense. Cupp and Joshpe argue that “[t]hanks to indelible countercultural mileposts like Haight-Ashbury and Woodstock, conservatives have inaccurately been labeled ‘the establishment’ by liberals who cling to the romanticism of rebellion and revolution that they can no longer inspire.”⁴¹ As conservatives, the claimants must condemn the left for its irreverence. But as conservative claimants of cultural oppression, they must condemn it for *its undeserved reputation for irreverence*.

³⁷ Ibid. pg. 125.

³⁸ Ibid. pg. 98.

³⁹ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Other Culture War*, in *Is There A Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*, eds. E.J. Dionne Jr. and Michael Cromartie (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), pg. 81.

⁴⁰ Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), pg. 150

⁴¹ S.E. Cupp and Brett Joshpe, *Why You’re Wrong About The Right: Behind The Myths—The Surprising Truth About Conservatives* (New York: Thresholds Editions, 2008), pg. 98.

The irreverence is now a purview of the right, conservatives believe. It is the “peculiarity of our time,” writes Justin Katz, that “one must, in essential philosophy, be conservative to be contrarian.”⁴² Caitrin Nicol describes her homeschooling as part of a “Revolution” and observes that “the sort of people to whom revolutionariness is theoretically appealing are more likely to find it disturbing,” for “there’s no telling what the social conservatives are up to out of sight!”⁴³ In a similar vein, Nathan Harden recalls that as a religious conservative, he “attended Yale as one of a minority of moral outsiders” and that “[i]n the context of Yale’s ‘liberated’ sexual culture, we prudes were deviants.”⁴⁴ Conservatives’ long-held *theoretical* moralism has become synthesized with a new *temperamental* anti-moralism. While liberalism lies outside the mainstream of traditional American values, it is conservatives who proudly lie outside the mainstream of American society as presently constituted. Conservatism now stands, not only for its substantive principles, but also for the broader ideal of dissent, upon which liberalism only trades rhetorically. The deception has been effective, however. And so conservatives now find themselves culturally oppressed by the fact that liberals, the consummate insiders, sycophants, and apparatchiks, can portray themselves as fearless rebels while depicting those who actually bear the costs of rebellion as mindless reactionaries cringing before a world they do not understand.

But this is all cultural propaganda as conservatives see it, because the supposed reactionaries are really the awoken ones, those rare individuals who somehow escaped the usual effects of liberalism’s quasi-monopoly over the means of cultural reproduction. Just as the New Left worried that mass media and entertainment promoted a “one-dimensional” quietism before an alienating and dehumanizing industrial order, so Kahane now explains that progressives’ worst nightmare is that “an aroused citizenry casts off its TV-induced torpor and begins to reengage with its own culture.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Christopher Gawley writes that conservative Coloradans fighting pro-gay anti-discrimination laws were “given the opportunity to wake their fellow citizens” from “the nihilistic slumber they confront all around them daily.”⁴⁶ Traditionally an aspiration of the Left, consciousness-raising is now exhorted by the Right as the precondition of cultural resistance. To resist the liberalism that is without, they must first overcome the

⁴² Justin Katz, *A Nonconforming Reconstruction*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010), pg.73-75

⁴³ Caitrin Nicol, *Immersion Experience*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010), pg. 124.

⁴⁴ Nathan Harden, *The Girls I Knew at Yale*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010), pg. 60.

⁴⁵ Kahane, *Rules for Radical Conservatives*, pg. 85.

⁴⁶ Christopher J. Gawley, *A Requiem for Morality: A Response to Peter M. Cicchino*, 30 Cap. U. L. Rev. 711, 753 (2002).

liberalism which lies within, must “reengage” with their own culture in order to recover the suppressed historical memory of another way of life.

This requirement is understood as testimony to the depth of liberal encroachment. Conservatives, says Himmelfarb, were once “convinced that ‘the people,’ as distinct from the ‘elites,’ were still ‘sound,’ still devoted to traditional values, and that only superficially and intermittently were they (or more often their children) seduced by the blandishments of the counterculture.” But this “confidence has eroded, as surely as the values themselves have.”⁴⁷ Conservative claimants of cultural oppression understand themselves as representing, not the numerical majority, but *what the numerical majority would be once freed from the mass indoctrination of ultra-liberalism*. If Americans are more liberal than is consistent with what conservatives maintain is America’s essentially conservative heritage, this is because Americans have been *seduced*—not persuaded—to turn their backs on that heritage. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are a *constructive* populism. They speak for the American people, not as they presently are, but as they should be and would be but for the encroachments of liberalism. The “ordinary American” they celebrate is a Platonic form for whose corrupted empirical manifestations liberalism is responsible, a symbol of America’s lost soul that remains buried deep within us all.

This is why there remains hope. Their deep pessimism notwithstanding, many conservatives believe they are beginning to make serious inroads in their struggle to tear away liberalism’s veil of illusion and restore freedom and dignity to the ordinary American. While acknowledging that liberals continue to dominate popular culture, Anderson detects the emergence of a “new post-liberal counterculture” that ruthlessly takes aims at established liberal pieties.⁴⁸ The new conservative blogosphere “explodes...[the] ‘trust us’ paternalism” of the liberal old-media.⁴⁹ A new wave of conservative comedians targets “the orthodoxies of the modern Left” in the same way earlier comedians like Lenny Bruce “directed their fire at bourgeois conventions,” thereby offering “a liberating release for students whose left-wing professors seek to impose on them the ‘right’ thoughts about race and sex.”⁵⁰ Anderson believes that the new conservative media have “nourished a fiercely anti-liberal comedic spirit, whose anarchic, vulgar archetype is Comedy Central’s brilliant cartoon series, *South Park*.”⁵¹ Its creators “have made their show

⁴⁷ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures: A Searching Examination of American Society in the Aftermath of Our Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), pg. 118.

⁴⁸ Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005), pg. xv.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 111.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 92.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pg. xiv.

not only the most obscenity-laced but also the most hostile to liberalism in television history,”⁵² ridiculing liberal pieties about the dignity of the disabled, the environment, sexual harassment, and their “multiculti sentimentality about holistic medicine and the ‘wisdom’ of native cultures.”⁵³ Partisan, raucous, and overheated though it may be, conservative talk-radio “has given the Right in all its varieties a chance to break through the liberal monoculture and be heard”⁵⁴—offering a welcome alternative to liberal commentary that is “sanctimonious and deadly, deadly earnest.”⁵⁵

Liberalism remains the dominant dispensation, of course. But given the extent of that dominance, the resistance mustered by conservatives is no mean feat. As with George Washington facing a militarily superior opponent, mere survival can qualify as victory, for mere survival is a symbol of a resilience that might someday, under happier circumstances, secure its ultimate ends. If the claimants retain their faith in a brighter future despite what they insist is liberalism’s overwhelming ascendancy, this is because that ascendancy has been built atop of a great lie that is destined to crumble one day, as all lies finally must. “Once you see it, it can’t be unseen,” as Shapiro says. However difficult exposing the lies of liberalism may be, doing so is all that is required to bring down the great edifice that has been built atop of them.

3. Stealth and Subterfuge

What *Chronicles* denounces as the subtlety and insidiousness of the liberal activist agenda cannot be overemphasized. If conservatives need to raise their consciousness, this is because liberalism has like every dominant dispensation created social conditions under which it will no longer be recognized for what it is. Liberalism, says Kimball, has “take[n] on an aura of inevitability.” It presents itself “not so much [as] a way of looking at the world as the world itself.” Disagreement with it now “appears as dissent from the simple reality of the way things are: less a challenge than a perversion.”⁵⁶ Recalling his student days at Berkeley in the 1970s, Andrew Klaven explains the challenges of reaching conservative consciousness:

[Leftism] was the atmosphere, was the water. I was always a disgruntled liberal....I always knew something was wrong and I can pick out things along the way that just drove me crazy. I mean I remember affirmative action, just thinking this is a dead end in terms of thought, in terms of the ability to think. But it never occurred to me that the air I was breathing was wrong...It was like being in the Matrix—remember the movie the Matrix? It was like a complete imitation of reality

⁵² Ibid., pg. 88.

⁵³ Ibid., pg. 76.

⁵⁴ Ibid. pg. 50.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 41.

⁵⁶ Roger Kimball, *Mill, Stephen, and the Nature of Freedom*, in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), pg. 43.

that you really had to start to hook your finger through and start to see outside that there was another reality that you could have.⁵⁷

If conservatism, as Frank observes, now accuses, rants, points out hypocrisies, and gleefully pounces on contradictions, this is because liberal hegemony permits of no other response. Ultra-liberalism is never straightforwardly presented to the public as a clearly delineated philosophy susceptible to rational debate. Being embedded in the very fabric of our culture, as *Chronicles* says, it has become invisible, absorbed into take-for-granted common sense as just the air we breathe. And so conservatives can do no more than try to hook their fingers through the liberal Matrix. The foremost task of conservative claims of cultural oppression, then, is less to issue principled disagreements with liberalism than the logically prior task of establishing that principled disagreement *is possible*. This means exposing the manipulations my means of which we have been trained to mistake one perspective on reality for reality itself. Only then does genuine debate become possible. Inasmuch as a conservative argument functions as a claim of cultural oppression, the goal is not to establish the substantive truth of any position but to “level the playing field” between Left and Right, not to win the debate but to insist on fair terms of debate, to compel the left to “come clean” about “where it is coming from.”

Ultra-liberalism seeks to elude such transparency at all costs, however. O’Reilly writes that, with the “secular-progressive movement” being antithetical to America’s deepest instincts, it must resort to “stealth and subterfuge” in order to achieve its ends.⁵⁸ In denying that a culture war exists, it employs a “denial strategy” for “public consumption.”⁵⁹ Rather than boldly proclaiming its ultimate ends, it offers up “small doses of secular-progressive philosophy” under the guise of “mainstream liberal politics until the nation is gradually inured to its agenda.”⁶⁰ On their face, the ideals of liberalism should appeal to all reasonable minds. But close inspection reveals a special code for priorities that liberals will not acknowledge openly. The problem, explains Ingraham, is that the elites invoke the same democratic ideals embraced by ordinary Americans, but then use them “in very different ways” in order “to establish elite rule over us.”⁶¹ Speaking satirically on behalf of the Left, David Kahane explains that “we never use a word with a uniform meaning that’s clear to both sides when we can use one with a double meaning, one of which is invisible and inaudible to you.”⁶²

⁵⁷ <http://www.hoover.org/publications/uncommon-knowledge>

⁵⁸ Bill O’Reilly, *Culture Warrior* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), pg. 35.

⁵⁹ Ibid. pg. 168.

⁶⁰ Ibid. pg. 43.

⁶¹ Laura Ingraham, *Shut Up & Sing: How Elites from Hollywood, Politics, and the UN Are Subverting America* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2003), pg. 48.

⁶² Kahane, *Rule for Conservative Radicals*, pg. 123.

Conservatives detect this policy of studied ambiguity along a wide range of fronts. Sowell observes that while the anointed extol “public service,” this is public service as defined, not by the demands of the public itself as revealed by the free market, but by the preferences of third-parties “enforced through government and paid for by the power of taxation.”⁶³ In a similar sleight-of-hand, “public health” is invoked as a pretext for propagating a bohemian morality. While sex education is sold to the public as a prophylactic against tangible social problems like teenage pregnancy and venereal disease, the movement’s leaders have a more insidious agenda, which is to reshape the attitudes of a captive audience and supplant traditional values with avant-garde ones. Why else, asks Sowell, would anyone advocate that sex education begin in kindergarten and continue through college, when “it could not possibly take that much time to teach basic biological or medical information about sex.”⁶⁴ And then there are the endless calls for “diversity.” Like public service and public health, diversity is unobjectionable on its face. But diversity, writes D’Souza, has “los[t] its procedural meaning and assume[d] substantive content,” referring, not “to a range of views on a disputed question,” but to a set of ideological causes agreement with which is being “for diversity” and opposition to which is being “against diversity.”⁶⁵ In a similar vein, David Horowitz observes that the “critical thinking” now promoted by universities is “a common political code among academic radicals” designating the Marxist critique of capitalism, and not some general commitment to “scientific skepticism and intellectual pluralism.”⁶⁶

In all these cases as in many others, there is a concrete meaning laying concealed underneath an ideal that is broadly palatable when presented in the abstract. For liberals are disingenuously attempting to assign what is a disputed interpretation of the broad ideal the common sense flavor that should properly attach only to the abstraction. They thus treat their narrow interpretations as though they were the ideals themselves, foreclosing debate by settling the meaning of essentially contested concepts in advance. Hence what Sowell calls liberals’ “preemptive rhetoric,” the purpose of which is to prevent fair, reasoned, and uncoercive debate with conservatives. The liberal bait-and-switch presents proposals in hard-nosed, non-sectarian terms while implementing them in a narrowly ideological fashion. Conservatives oppose only the sectarian implementations, not the ideals as such. But liberals’ preemptive rhetoric caricatures them as opposing the latter, and hence as reactionaries hostile to all that is good,

⁶³ Sowell, *Vision of the Anointed*, pg. 184.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 20.

⁶⁵ Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pg. 214.

⁶⁶ David Horowitz and Jacob Laskin, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America’s Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), pg. 97.

true, and beautiful. Conservaphobia is thus built into the very language in which liberals frame the issues, a language fraught with traps for any conservative so naïve as to imagine that liberals are prepared to engage him in good-faith deliberation. If conservatives now gleefully pounce on contradictions, as Frank observes, this is because liberalism is now defined by an ever-recurring contradiction between appearance and reality, between a universalistic façade and a parochial subtext concealed beneath it.

The preemptive rhetoric may take the form of seemingly innocent refrains. When a progressive tells a conservative “You can’t possibly mean that,” the point, says Kahane, “is to stop the argument in its tracks,” to assert the progressive’s “higher reality.” “Everyone knows that” is likewise “[a]nother all-purpose put-down,” intended to broadcast that the conservative is a “complete idiot,” just as “You’re not really...” is meant to suggest that the conservative interlocutor “is little better than a cave-dweller, a superstitious moron whose walnut-size brain is probably stuffed with religious ‘dogma.’”⁶⁷ Here is the censorship of fashion in all its insidiousness. A liberal asking a conservative “You can’t possibly mean...” is like a man admonishing a woman to “calm down”—something which may not be terribly offensive in the abstract but assumes a more nefarious meaning in the context of a long history of objectionable stereotypes. Progressives need not directly assert their claims to moral and intellectual superiority because these are being asserted *for them* by the unspoken mores of the ambient culture, which they tacitly invoke through these facially innocuous expressions of bemusement. What the progressive tries to sell as an innocent request for clarification is in its unacknowledged undertones a direct assault on the conservatives’ character and intellect, the insinuation that no thinking person could possibly believe what the conservative claims to believe. Pretending to extend the conservative the benefit of the doubt, the liberal assaults him with his very magnanimity. Though feigning that he is engaged in a one-on-one conversation between inquiring minds, the liberal quietly invokes a presumed social consensus before which the conservative is expected to cower in shame.

Liberals can thus send conservatives the message while remaining cloaked in plausible deniability. This plausible deniability moreover allows liberals to chalk up the ensuing conservative resentments to unhinged irascibility or paranoia. Employing a façade of rationalism to disguise the performative dimension of their opinion-making, liberals reinforce a subtle social hierarchy that is just as pervasive as it is deniable. Liberals can thus drown conservatives in an ever-expanding accretion of insinuations and intimations, a Kafkaesque world each layer of which is recognizable only by reference to the rest, leaving conservatives unable to expose the bigotry of liberals even as they are submerged by it.

⁶⁷ Kahane, *Rules for Conservative Radicals*, pg. 166.

The cumulative result of all the subterfuge, double-talk, and mystification is that ultra-liberalism is now seen, not merely as the superior public philosophy, but also as a special vantage point that is somehow post-ideological and “pragmatic.” Goldberg’s *Liberal Fascism* warns:

The unique threat of today’s left-wing political religions is precisely that they claim to be free of dogma. Instead, they profess to be champions of liberty and pragmatism, which in their view are self-evident goods. They eschew ‘ideological’ concerns. Therefore they make it impossible to argue with their most basic ideas and exceedingly difficult to expose the totalitarian temptations residing in their hearts.⁶⁸

Liberals are entitled to their ideological convictions, and Goldberg believes that ideologies are indispensable epistemic heuristics. But whereas conservatives and libertarians openly defend their ideologies, progressives “lie to themselves and the world” about their ideological agendas, disguising these with “Trojan Horse clichés and smug assertions that they are simply pragmatists, fact finders, and empiricists who are clearheaded as to ‘what works.’”⁶⁹ Liberals vaunted pragmatism and empiricism are in reality forms of mystification and obscurantism. While liberals would prefer to associate these traits with traditional religion, they are what now define liberalism as a concrete social practice.

Goldberg reports that in 2000 the National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education introduced yet another addition to the latest trend of “disposition evaluation” designed to identify successful teaching candidates. The dispositions to be measured were, according to the NCATE, those that are “guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice.”⁷⁰ None would object to caring, fairness, honesty, and responsibility, and adding “social justice” to the mix suggests to the casual observer that it is similarly uncontroversial. But Goldberg disagrees. Unlike these basic boy scout precepts, “[s]ocial justice is not a nonideological concept that simply draws on ethics or morality or the overall need for goodness in society” but rather a “deeply ideological set of assumptions that most practitioners of social justice refuse to openly and sincerely acknowledge.”⁷¹ The “social justice disposition” does not measure pedagogical competence or anything related to the substance of the subjects to be taught, and is rather a subterfuge by which to weed out non-leftists without acknowledging discrimination.⁷²

⁶⁸ Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pgs. 404-5.

⁶⁹ Jonah Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas* (Sentinel 2012), pgs. 13-14.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 136.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 143.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pg. 137.

In what precisely does this ideology of social justice consist? The problem is that no one who does not already endorse it really knows, because they will not be told. The “closer to the mainstream an organization gets,” writes Goldberg, “the less it will *explain* what social justice *is*, and the more they’ll just let those in the know interpret the code for themselves.”⁷³ If others cannot access the code, this is because

[social justice] becomes like The Force in *Star Wars*. Who are the Jedis? They are good people who are strong with The Force. What is The Force? It is what Jedis are strong with. The social justice syllogism goes something like this: 1) We are liberals. 2) Liberals believe it is imperative that social justice be advanced wherever we find it. 3) Therefore, whatever we believe to be imperative *is* social justice. And there’s the corollary: If you oppose liberals in advancing what they want, you are against not just liberals but social justice itself.⁷⁴

Social justice purports to be a secular concept amenable to rational adjudication. But in practice, it functions as a kind of iridescent, quasi-divine glow akin to the halos that surrounded saints and angels in medieval painting. It is a special dispensation too deep and exalted to be explained to those lacking first-hand experience of it, a form of knowledge that, arising directly out of liberal virtue, cannot be grasped by those in whom that virtue has yet to be inculcated. As for the medieval theologians, understanding follows from faith. And if liberals have arrogated the status of Jedis, then, correlatively, conservatives are greeted as Darth Vader figures, villains whose actual words and arguments are always preceded by vague intimations of the diabolical. *Star Wars* viewers did not bother to consider whether the Empire would better serve the Galaxy under prevailing conditions. For the atmospherics of the film had already settled that question in advance. And likewise, conservative ideas can no longer be approached with any modicum of openness, because conservative views have now been silenced by the atmospherics of liberalism. Liberals present themselves as rationalists. But their exaltation of social justice betrays that their rationalism is vitiated by something more primordial than their self-conceptions permit them to acknowledge—but which conservatives, the despised outsiders, cannot but confront.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression will be classified as a form of “right-wing populism.” And this is not inaccurate. But the label radically under-describes the phenomenon—which is why I have been compelled to coin a neologism. The archetypal right-wing populist simply condemns the elites for their subversive attacks on morality, religious faith, or the prerogatives of privileged ethnic insiders. But conservative claims of cultural oppression are systematically inflected by a respect for many quintessentially liberal virtues—equal dignity, intellectual pluralism, transparency, free debate—to which

⁷³ Ibid. pg. 136.

⁷⁴ Ibid. pg. 134.

the classic right-wing populist does not appeal. Genuine or not, these values are integral to the claimants' self-understanding.

Like traditional right-wing populism, conservative claims of cultural oppression are concerned to defend traditional morality, religion, patriotism and other inherited folkways against the subversive influence of alienated elites. But the elites' principal sin is less their personal rejection of those values than their refusal to criticize them on a "level playing field" that would give conservatives a fair opportunity to advance their side of the argument. The liberal elites do indeed represent an alien sensibility insinuating itself into the indigenous culture of the ordinary American, and in a manner akin to how the Eastern European Jewish communist intellectual was once unwelcome an unwholesome and corrupting foreign presence amidst the native culture of homegrown white Protestants. But by contrast with the archetypal know-nothing who feels only rancor and vitriol, the conservative claimant of cultural oppression sees it as testimony to his own tolerance and ecumenicism that he could forgive this foreignness if only it would fight fair, if only it would stop being so "sublimely confident" in its convictions and accede to ordinary intellectual give-and-take. The conservative of yesteryear objected to the Marxist professor's corrupting influence on youth. But for conservative claims of cultural oppression, the problem is not the mere presence of Marxists in the classroom, but that Marxist opinion is now identified with critical thinking as such. The objection is not to the "what" but to the "how." Conservative claims of cultural oppression are right-wing populism turned post-modern. They protest liberalism, not as a public philosophy but *as a meta-narrative*—as a set of ideas that, no longer being recognizable as ideas, have as Kimball says seeped into "the realm of habit, taste, and feeling."

Conservatives will frame the precise nature of liberals' duplicity in various ways. But they are united by the conviction that liberalism is sustained in existence by some all-pervasive social distortion, and that this distortion must be exposed if rhetorical parity between Left and Right is to be restored. Goldberg condemns the liberal denial of ideology as "offensive to logic, culturally pernicious, and, yes, infuriating." And his exasperation is that of all conservatives, who find themselves perennially accused of moral and intellectual failure by those who lack any standing to condemn them. With acrobatic dexterity, liberals have eluded every attempt to hold them accountable, and have now been taken in by their own performances as dispassionate rationalists and pragmatists. With conservatives being the only remaining threat to those performances, to the liberal identity, they cannot but become an *Other*. The conservaphobia from which they suffer is neither a gratuitous free-floating vice nor a calculated political strategy, but the logical corollary of liberalism's basic self-understanding as somehow above the fray of sect and ideology.

4. Specious Asymmetries, Unacknowledged Symmetries

Liberals have often taken note of what seems like the glaring inconsistency with which conservatives casually oscillate between accusing them first of nihilistic relativism and then of puritanical moralism and political correctness. Frank observes that conservatives condemn liberals for being “relativists to whom nothing is sacred and yet, at the same time, omnipotent inquisitors able to call down instant censure on the heads of innocent Americans.”⁷⁵ John Wilson notes the same contradiction in D’Souza’s attack on multiculturalism in higher education. D’Souza criticized Stanford’s “Culture, Ideas, and Values” core curriculum on the grounds that “values suggested a certain relativism, in which various systems of thought would be considered on a roughly equal plane.” But in the next breath, D’Souza compares minority student activist to Rigoberta Menchu, a left-wing Guatemalan Indian activist whose autobiography was the most controversial element of the new Stanford curriculum, lamenting that, just like her, the campus activists “tend to see their lives collectively as a historical melodrama involving the forces of good and evil, in which they are cast as secular saints and martyrs.” Conservatives thus place liberals in an impossible Catch-22 where they cannot eschew relativism and nihilism without becoming instantly guilty of melodramatic moralism.⁷⁶ And this suggests to liberals that both conservative accusations are meritless.

But the conservative contradiction lies in the eye of the liberal beholder. The conservative grievance is that liberals wield the jargon of neutrality, tolerance, and diversity selectively in order to discredit conservative morality and make way for their own morality, which is where the inquisitorial censoriousness is to be found. What strikes liberals as a glaring contradiction is just the difference between appearance and reality, as well as between expedient and ultimate aim. The relativism first disarms conservatives of their convictions, at which point liberals’ own convictions can be imposed. “Tolerance,” observes John O’Sullivan, has become a device to silence debate and thereby “elevate certain liberal ideas and constituencies above public criticism.”⁷⁷

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression accuse liberals of disingenuously denying what they insist is the fundamental *symmetry* between conservatism and liberalism. And this is that both are just alternative visions of the good, alternative faiths. Liberals are no less than conservatives “imposing” a

⁷⁵ Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, pg. 122.

⁷⁶ John K. Wilson, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education* (Duke University Press, 1995), pg. 71.

⁷⁷ John O’Sullivan, *The Moral Consequence of Impatience*, in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), pg. 222.

local morality upon others who do not share it. As McConnell puts it, modern liberalism “proclaims its neutrality toward competing ideas of virtue and the good life, but is committed in practice to the promotion of particular ideals and--even more--to the eradication of others.”⁷⁸ If this hypocrisy escapes notice, this is only because liberals’ undeserved rhetorical advantages allow them to dismiss conservatives as narrow-minded and parochial as they bask in a posture of ecumenical cosmopolitanism standing above the fray. Again and again and in a wide range of spheres, conservative claimants of cultural oppression seek to explode this perception of asymmetry in order to reveal fundamental parallels between what purports to be liberal neutralism and the conservative parochialism to which it allegedly stands opposed. Thus do they hope to demonstrate that they and liberals are “in the same business” and, with this recognized, that the moralistic excesses of liberalism are much more egregious than their own.

D’Souza writes that, far from repudiating morality as such, those who “champion pornography and cultural depravity are expressing a new morality.”⁷⁹ Though some conservatives make the mistake of criticizing liberals for their relativistic non-judgmentalism, liberal morality is in fact “extremely judgmental in condemning traditional morality.” Such is betrayed by their “crusading zeal.”⁸⁰ What they cast as universal emancipation from tyranny and superstition is in truth the entrenching of a new ideology and social hierarchy. D’Souza explains:

Behind the innumerable examples of excess, immodesty, and immorality there is an ideology. Here are some of the ingredients of that ideology, which constitutes Hollywood’s understanding of how the world is, or should be. Children are usually wiser than their parents and teachers, who are often portrayed as fools and bunglers. Homosexuals are typically presented as good-looking and charming, and unappealing features of the gay lifestyle are either ignored or presented in an amusing light. As countless movie plots confirm, the white businessman in the suit is usually the villain. Prostitutes are always portrayed more favorably and decently than anyone who criticizes them. Small towns are the preferred venue for evil and scary occurrences, and country pastors are usually portrayed as vicious, hypocritical, sexually repressed, and corrupt. Notwithstanding the occasional appearance of the stereotypical Elmer Gantry, nobody goes to church. Religion is simply not a feature in the lives of movie and television characters. Lots of film and TV characters have pre-marital sex, but very rarely does anyone contract a sexually transmitted disease. “Prudes” are always the subject of jokes and ridicule. One of the central themes of American movies and television is the glamorization of adultery. Adultery is almost always portrayed sympathetically, so that if a woman cheats on her husband, the husband is generally shown to be vicious, unscrupulous, abusive, impotent, or in some way deserving of the fate that befalls him.⁸¹

Liberals have not eliminated moralistic censoriousness as such, but only replaced one version of it with their own, a new moral ideology that obscures its true nature by speciously trading on its historical

⁷⁸ Michael McConnell, “*God is Dead and We Have Killed Him!*”: *Freedom of Religion in the Post-modern Age*, 1993 B.Y.U.L. Rev. 163, 176 (1993).

⁷⁹ D’Souza, *Enemy at Home*, pg. 140.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 145.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 130.

opposition to traditional morality. Traditional morality has simply become the foil onto which liberals project their own judgmentalism. Liberals are not in fact more tolerant or cosmopolitan than traditionalists. But they have been culturally credentialed as such by the dominant dispensation. And so they need only display ritual contempt for certain traditional objects of social veneration in order to be celebrated as “sophisticated” notwithstanding that their judgments are just as reflexive and unthinking as traditional morality.

The liberal will retort that he is moralistic only inasmuch as he opposes the moralism of conservatives, and that his own second-order moralism is therefore asymmetrical with that to which it is being speciously compared. But conservatives see this as just a rationalizing ideology. The *conceit* is that Hollywood is just knocking the country pastor off his pedestal, acting as a check against the unthinking reverence he normally enjoys, and so performing a critical intellectual function that only the truly benighted could oppose. But the truth is that the country pastor was long ago stripped of the social prestige that is being disingenuously imputed to him. Hollywood’s pretense to the contrary is merely an expedient through which to disguise its ideological narrowness as some kind of courageous critical enterprise. For what purports to be a critical enterprise is in fact the crude otherization of traditionalists, morally no different than the otherization of gays and prostitutes. Nevertheless, the *new moralism dictates what we are able to recognize as moralism* and so allows liberals to operate with an impunity that is foreclosed to conservatives.

Liberals may be less judgmental than conservatives when it comes to sexual orientation or abortion. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe that the censoriousness of the Left is merely of another kind, and one that is on the whole much more intrusive than their own could ever be. Conservatism, writes Goldberg, “describes a very specific and very limited sphere of life.” By contrast, liberalism “tells you how to be, what to buy,” dictating that you “wear progressive clothes, drive progressive cars, have progressive attitudes about what kind of toilets you use.”⁸² The dictates of liberalism will be enforced in different ways in different spheres, either formally or informally as the situation requires. But the need to in one way or another preempt the individual choices of the benighted is a constant of liberalism. While liberals will mock conservatives as the inheritors of priggish Victorian moralism, conservatives believe stands the truth on its head and projects liberals’ own sins onto conservatives. It is “those who profess to be in the vanguard of enlightened thought,” writes Himmelfarb,

⁸² Qt. in Cupp and Joshpe, *Why You’re Wrong about the Right*, pg. 77.

who most resemble the Victorians' Mrs. Grundy, a figure of mockery who "was immortalized in the language as a symbol of the narrow-minded, self-righteous, self-appointed social censor."⁸³

This was confirmed in the childhood traumas of conservative commentator Tucker Carlson, whose conservatism was sparked early in life in reaction to his first-grade teacher, Mrs. Raymond. Mrs. Raymond was a preening progressive who occupied class time railing against the evils of the class system and white bread, making nasty remarks about conservative politicians and teaching little. The straw that broke the camel's back arrived when she was invited to his home to provide extra tutoring to him and his brother. Rather than just doing her job, she instead took his father to task for allowing the children to eat Cap'n Crunch cereal, confronting the spectacle with "a look of shock and horror on her face, the look of a priest who has stumbled into a black Mass." She was promptly ejected from the home. Mrs. Raymond was Carlson's personal encounter with the Victorians' Mrs. Grundy. And it was this encounter that first instructed him in the meaning of conservatism. A conservative, writes Carlson, is someone who "instinctively sides with the individual over the group," who "understands that not every choice is a moral issue, that sometimes people just prefer plastic to paper, a Suburban to a Prius, and that's okay."⁸⁴

The liberal will promptly retort that conservatives have overlooked a basic asymmetry, which is that Suburbans impose environmental costs that Priuses do not. So liberals' alleged aversion to the former is hardly self-indulgent moralism, for it is rooted in tangible human welfare that everyone can value irrespective of their sectarian allegiances. But here as elsewhere, conservative claimants of cultural oppression refuse to accept liberals at face value and suspect that their ostensibly "tangible" priorities are post-hoc rationalizations the Mrs. Grundy-type impulses they would prefer to associate with conservatives. Liberal moralism enjoys plausible deniability, and this is what makes it so dangerous. Being surreptitious and unrecognized, the moralistic vehemence of liberals cannot be tempered or restrained, and so must far surpass that of conservatives.

Nor are liberals able to recognize their own species of sectarianism. Charles Kors writes that "[d]espite the talk of 'celebrating' diversity, colleges and universities do not, in fact, mean the celebration, deep study, and appreciation of evangelical, fundamentalist, Protestant culture; nor of traditionalist Catholic culture; nor of the gender roles of Orthodox Jewish or of Shiite Islamic culture; nor of black American Pentacostal culture; nor of assimilation; nor of the white, rural South. These are not 'multicultural.'"⁸⁵ Just like diversity, "sensitivity" is a facially universalistic ideal that is unobjectionable in

⁸³ Himmelfarb, *De-Moralization of Society*, pg. 260.

⁸⁴ Qt. in Cupp and Joshpe, *Why You're Wrong about the Right*, pgs. ix-xii.

⁸⁵ Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), pg. 192.

the abstract. But universities' solicitude for diverse group identities does not extend to those who reject the dominant dispensation. Campus speech codes protect the sensibilities of left-wing students, but they allow these same students to label conservative blacks "Uncle Toms" and label anti-feminist women "mall chicks."⁸⁶ Students who believe homosexuality is sinful can be charged with harassing their gay and lesbian cohorts. But pro-choice students who surround a silent pro-life vigil and chant "Racist, sexist, antigay born-again bigots go away" are seen as engaged in protected speech.⁸⁷

Liberals believe they know how to put themselves in others' shoes, so Kors proposes the following thought-experiment:

Imagine secular, skeptical, or leftist faculty and students confronted by a religious harassment code that prohibited "denigration" of evangelical or Catholic beliefs, or that made the classroom or campus a space where evangelical or Catholic students must be protected against feeling "intimidated," "offended," or, by their own subjective experience, victims of a "hostile environment. Imagine a university of patriotic "loyalty oaths" where leftists were deemed responsible for the tens of millions of victims of communism, and where free minds were prohibited from creating a hostile environment for patriots, or from offending that "minority" of individuals who are descended from Korean or Vietnam War veterans. Imagine, as well, that for every "case" that became public, there were scores or hundreds of cases in which the "offender" or "victimizer," desperate to preserve a job or gain a degree, accepted a confidential plea bargain that included a semester's or a year's reeducation in "religious sensitivity" or "patriotic sensitivity" seminars run by the university's "Evangelical Center," "Patriotic Center," or "Office of Religious and Patriotic Compliance."⁸⁸

As a free speech advocate, Kors does not actually endorse such an agenda. He is, however, claiming cultural oppression, because the contemplation of these role reversals reveals symmetry where liberals see only asymmetry. If an "Office of Religious and Patriotic Compliance" sounds sinister and totalitarian, we might instead envision a new regime of diversity training that encourages incoming college freshmen to examine their conservaphobic prejudices and overcome these to the extent this is possible in a conservaphobic culture. The goal would not be political indoctrination, as this kind of diversity training wouldn't call on liberal students to become conservative any more than standard diversity training calls on straight students to become gay. They need only explore their latent fears and biases in order to create a more tolerant atmosphere for all students. But even this, liberals will not accept, and this shows that they are unwilling to play by the same rules they impose on conservatives.

The liberal will object that what conservatives caricature as arbitrary favoritism actually bespeaks the sociological sophistication with which liberals discern background power inequalities, which cannot

⁸⁶ Alan Charles Kors, *Bad Faith: The Politicization of the University In Loco Parentis*, in *THE IMPERILED ACADEMY* 153, 165, ed. Howard Dickman (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), pg. 165.

⁸⁷ Kors and Silvergate, *Shadow University*, pg. 249.

⁸⁸ Kors and Silvergate, *Shadow University*, pg. 101-2.

be discounted when formulating the concrete meaning of “diversity” and “sensitivity.” If the left *seems* indefensibly partial toward certain interests, this is only because this background has not been factored into the equation. Evangelicals and descendants of war veterans are not historically disenfranchised groups, and so do not require the special protections that liberals offer others. These protections exist to compensate, not to elevate. However, conservatives insist that this sociological sophistication is a social illusion and that liberals’ solicitude for their favored groups partakes of the very same parochialism that is self-evident when the cause is religious or nationalistic—that is, conservative. Offices of diversity and inclusion seem self-evidently enlightened while offices of religious and patriotic compliance seem self-evidently authoritarian. But conservatives agree with Roger Scruton that what liberals would present as a clash “between dark intolerance and enlightened reason” is “nothing more than a clash of prejudices.” The difference is that whereas “one side frankly admits that the feelings it brings into this dispute are moral, the other hides its bigotry behind a mask of reason, serenely expecting to carry the day.”⁸⁹

Liberal prejudice may proceed with airs of sociological sophistication, but this is a mask disguising impulses that are in their essentials *symmetrical* with what liberals condemn as the merely parochial allegiances of conservatives. This symmetry is well concealed by the Left’s quasi-monopoly over the mechanisms of cultural reproduction. But it becomes salient whenever that quasi-monopoly is threatened. Responding to the University of Pennsylvania’s suggestion that ACLU concerns about its speech codes constituted warrantless outside interference with an internal university matter, Kors calls this “reminiscent of those Southern sheriffs in the early ‘60s talking about ‘outside agitators’ stirring up trouble in their counties, where justice is fine, thank you.”⁹⁰ The bigoted, small-minded Southern sheriff—a stereotypical symbol of conservative authoritarianism—thus has a counterpart among the left-leaning administrators of an Ivy League university. Though surely more eloquent and erudite than a Bull Connor, they are given over to some of the same basic impulses, which are being disguised by the eloquence and erudition.

* * *

The drive to discover symmetry underneath ostensible asymmetry is pronounced in the religion context. Conservative claimants of cultural oppression will sometimes defend religion in traditionalist terms, as society’s indispensable moral scaffolding. But as often, they turn to the language of the left and, demanding equal treatment for religionists, express their stupefaction that liberals’ celebration of

⁸⁹ Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), pg. 72.

⁹⁰ Kors and Silvergate, *Shadow University*, pg. 33.

diversity just happens to exclude religion. “[R]eligion, somehow, is different. Religion must be kept under wraps,” observes McConnell.⁹¹ The exclusion is a function of liberals ingrained contempt for religious traditionalists. David Limbaugh explains in his *Persecution* that “societies—and particularly societal elites—typically need opponents to denigrate, so they can define themselves by what they are not.” Jews and blacks will no longer fill the role of the “designated denigrated.” But since “prejudice abhors a vacuum,” Biblical Christians, poorly represented in elite circles, are now conscripted as “easy targets for the hatred that would otherwise have been aimed at others.”⁹² Tolerance “is touted as the highest virtue in our popular culture.”⁹³ But that tolerance is not extended to Christians, who are denied “equal dignity, respect, and treatment.”⁹⁴ If blacks were once maligned as the natural inferiors of whites, it is now, says Codevilla, the “Ruling Class” of liberal elites who “can no more believe that a Christian might be their intellectual and moral equal than white Southerners of the Jim Crow era could think the same of Negroes.”⁹⁵ In the same vein, Cal Thomas charges that in their refusal to recognize Christian writing as “serious literature or scholarship,” many publishers are “treating the Christian market as a kind of ‘Negro league’ of publishing.”⁹⁶ Liberalism “hides its bigotry behind the mask of reason” because it merely redirects without actually reducing the sum total of bigotry in the world, denigrating its targets to that its bigotry cannot be recognized as such.

Liberals will avouch that whatever animus they bear toward some religious believers is a direct reflection of the latter’s attempts to impose their creed on others, and not some generic need for a “designated denigrated.” But conservatives refuse to accept this high-mindedness at face value. Liberals claim to promote church-state separation as a prophylactic against the destructive social conflict that politicized religious passions are known to spawn. But conservatives insist this is a hollow pretext that seizes upon a now irrelevant and bygone history in order to make the denigration of religion socially acceptable. “No sooner does someone mention school prayer, for example, than religious wars and even the Spanish Inquisition get trotted out as warnings,” notes Elshtain.⁹⁷ The real goal is not to hold fanaticism in check but to stigmatize religious faith as such. The specter of fanaticism is merely an ideological tool with which to legitimize this stigma. Herbert London explains:

[T]here is a powerful campaign underway to suppress religious expression. Individuals may pray and sing hymns in private, so as not to give offense to nonbelievers, but such limitations transform

⁹¹ See Michael McConnell, *God is Dead and We Have Killed Him*. 166

⁹² David Limbaugh, *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2004), pg. 333.

⁹³ Ibid. pg. ix.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pg. 117.

⁹⁵ Qt. in, Codevilla, *The Ruling Class*, pg. 22.

⁹⁶ Qt. in James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Basic Books 1991), pg. 244.

⁹⁷ Elshtain, 139.

religious observance into something shameful. Religion cannot long endure if it is seen as such—a fact of which the secularists cannot possibly be unaware.⁹⁸

What liberals push as religious neutrality or strict church-state separation is actually a push to relegate religious believers to the margins of social respectability. For separationist rhetoric is just another way for the liberal elite to insinuate what it will not state. And this is that strong religious conviction is primitive and benighted, the product of intellectual deficiencies that may be hidden from believers themselves but are glaring to liberals. This has always been a mainstay of Left ideology. But liberals have now succeeded in transforming elite prejudices into mainstream common sense, into a censorship of fashion for which church-state separation is the ideological vehicle. The “Ruling Class,” says Codevilla, “cannot prevent Americans from worshipping God.” But “they can make it as socially disabling as smoking—to be done furtively and with a bad conscience.”⁹⁹

Liberals understand “secularism” as a commitment to maintaining the religious and the political in separate spheres, and so as nothing that is intrinsically hostile to religion as such. But the claimants see secularism as a positive orthodoxy that threatens to supplant religion. It is not merely a position about the proper place of religion in relation to other institutions and practices, but something which, in taking that position, is itself akin to religion. D’Souza writes that traditional Muslims and Christians alike are perplexed by secularists who condemn them for trying to “occupy the public square all by themselves, using the law as their instrument, and pushing everyone else into the background” while doing the very same themselves.¹⁰⁰ The hypocrisy gets overlooked because liberalism’s cultural dominance creates the illusion of liberal neutrality, the illusion that liberals stand above the fray of sectarian conflict when they are actually a party to it. McConnell thus observes that while secular liberals castigate religious believers for trying to “interject” their beliefs into school curriculums, they refuse to acknowledge that they too are interjecting, and “no matter how offensive and unfounded their choice of curriculum might seem to persons of a different mindset.”¹⁰¹ Liberals have simply accepted their own hegemony as the baseline from which to gauge interjection, masking their culturally contingent arrogation of power as an assertion of principle.

Here again, the Right has become the Left in order to accuse the Left of becoming the Right. McConnell notes that “[o]n the left, a postmodern intellectual current has cast doubt on the idea that

⁹⁸ Herbert London, *America’s Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008), pg. 13.

⁹⁹ Codevilla, *The Ruling Class*, pg. 51.

¹⁰⁰ D’Souza, *The Enemy at Home*, pg. 188.

¹⁰¹ McConnell, *God is Dead!*, pg. 174-75.

secular liberalism should enjoy a privileged position and has opened the possibility for treating religion as one of many competing conceptions of reality.”¹⁰² The problem is that this post-modern relativism gets applied only very selectively. Post-modernists are eager to expose the parochial, ideological nature of liberalism insofar as it privileges “patriarchal, white, male, European, and bourgeois interests and values.” But they ignore that parochialism insofar as it privileges secular interests and values over religious ones.¹⁰³ Post-modern relativism might have served as a useful corrective to the excesses of modern liberalism. But it has instead been co-opted by that liberalism, aggravating its worst tendencies and providing intellectual cover for its “selective multi-culturalism,” its “boundless tolerance and respect for some voices, and ruthless suppression of others.”¹⁰⁴ McConnell’s argument is a quintessential conservative claim of cultural oppression. Post-modern relativism, originally marshaled on behalf of racial and ethnic minorities, is now marshaled by those for whom liberals have less sympathy. If liberals’ disingenuousness is their most powerful weapon, it is also their key vulnerability, because the disingenuousness always provides an opening through which their own ideals may be wielded against them. This is what McConnell does. He is not himself a post-modern relativist. But he has acceded to the rhetorical supremacy of the Left as the framework in which conservative argument must now be advanced.

The same basic pattern appears in the gay rights context. Some conservatives continue to condemn the “homosexual lifestyle” as a grave threat to the moral foundations of society. But many others prefer to criticize the gay rights movement on liberal rather than conservative grounds, in the language of freedom, equality, tolerance, and diversity rather than on the basis of some highly contestable notion of moral order. They can do so because they identify the “gay agenda,” not with any universalistic commitment to freedom or equality, but with a parochial understanding of the good life whose prerogatives must be weighed against competing interests (just like secularism). Gay rights are not free-standing demands for equal dignity but rather one particular manifestation of the broader cultural transformation that oppresses conservatives. And so the question is not whether a majority is entitled to impose its tastes and values on a minority, but which of two cultures will prevail in what is a zero-sum game.

The gay rights movement seeks not to uproot prejudices but to mold sensibilities. It promotes not freedom of conscience for all but mind control by some. Limbaugh charges that gay activists want “to

¹⁰² Michael, McConnell, *Religious Freedom at a Crossroads*, 59 U Chi. L. Rev. 115, 134 (1992).

¹⁰³ McConnell, *supra* note 26, at 182;

¹⁰⁴ McConnell, *supra* note 26, at 187.

systematically normalize the homosexual culture and demonize any who obstruct such efforts.”¹⁰⁵ Such is illustrated by the popularity of plays like *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* and *Corpus Christi*, which retell Biblical stories from a gay perspective. This appropriation, argues Limbaugh, brings “into focus the virulent bigotry, hostility, and hypocrisy of the anti-Christian forces in modern life.”¹⁰⁶ These plays may seem innocuous to liberals. But where liberals see a refreshing diversity of perspectives with which one might agree or disagree, conservative claimants of cultural oppression see a calculated strategy of cultural denigration for which diversity and artistic license convenient pretexts. This was why Disney World decided to discontinue its “twenty-eight-year tradition of making on-site religious services available to Christian guests” at the same time as it “went out of its way to solicit the homosexual community, even having an annual ‘Gay Day’ event every year.”¹⁰⁷ Where liberals see the arbitrary juxtaposition of two unrelated developments each of which can be assessed independently of the other, the claimants see varied manifestations of the same basic phenomenon, the supplanting of their moral traditionalism by ultra-liberalism, whose support for gays is inextricably bound up with its hostility toward Christians.

Whatever the ostensible issue, the critical theory of the Right seeks to shine a light on the subterranean norms being mobilized *through* the issues, the broader symbolic environment which their resolution cannot but affect. Whether or not homosexuality is a “natural” phenomenon, it is also a social phenomenon, and therefore derives its social meaning from out of a broader matrix of social understandings. While liberals profess commitment to equality, this equality is promoted right alongside an unspoken social narrative about the relative value of different human beings. This is exactly what Limbaugh is attempting to highlight. Yet the sophisticated social holism upon which the Left would insist whenever race or gender are at issue will be dismissed as a pattern of arbitrary, unhinged association once adopted by conservatives. The left’s postmodernism is, just like its multiculturalism, highly selective.

Christopher Gawley writes that the “constitutional moral relativists” who oppose enacting moral opposition of homosexuality into law are “fundamentally contradictory.” If “they save individuals from the hordes of moral inquisitors” this is only “by being their own variety of moral inquisitors, namely amoral inquisitors” who “protect individuals from intolerance by being intolerant.”¹⁰⁸ Liberals will dismiss this contradiction as contrived because it presumes that the second-order intolerance of liberals is morally symmetrical with the first-order intolerance to which it stands opposed, when the truth is that conservative Christians incur whatever animus they do solely by virtue of their anti-gay stances, not their

¹⁰⁵ Limbaugh, *Persecution*, pg. 95.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pgs. 261-62.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pgs 226-27.

¹⁰⁸ Gawley, *A Requiem for Morality*, pg. 750.

Christianity as such. But here as elsewhere, *conservative claimants of cultural oppression see symmetry where liberals see asymmetry and asymmetry where liberals see symmetry*. Given that their anti-gay stances cannot be disentangled from their religion and that their religion cannot be disentangled from their identities, the claimants believe that both homosexuality and opposition to homosexuality are entitled to equal respect. For opposition to Christianity is just as intrinsic to homosexuality as opposition to homosexuality is intrinsic to Christianity. Both *can* devolve into bare antipathy and should be condemned in those instances. But neither is as such intrinsically more hateful than the other. Since the heartfelt defense of *any* worldview always risks devolving into personal animus toward the opponents of that worldview, the charge of widespread homophobia is itself a form of animus, a kind of conservaphobia, because the objective is to specifically associate religious conservatives with what is a regrettable human universal.

The cause of gay rights is thus just another arena on which the anointed prosecute their long war against the benighted. Dissenting in *Romer v. Evans*—invalidating on equal protection grounds an amendment to Colorado’s state constitution (“Amendment 2”) that would have barred municipalities from enacting pro-gay anti-discrimination ordinances—Justice Scalia observes:

When the Court takes sides in the culture wars, it tends to be with the knights rather than the villains - and more specifically with the Templars, reflecting the views and values of the lawyer class from which the Court's Members are drawn. How that class feels about homosexuality will be evident to anyone who wishes to interview job applicants at virtually any of the Nation's law schools. The interviewer may refuse to offer a job because the applicant is a Republican; because he is an adulterer; because he went to the wrong prep school or belongs to the wrong country club; because he eats snails; because he is a womanizer; because she wears real-animal fur; or even because he hates the Chicago Cubs. But if the interviewer should wish not to be an associate or partner of an applicant because he disapproves of the applicant's homosexuality, then he will have violated the pledge which the Association of American Law Schools requires all its member-schools to exact from job interviewers: "assurance of the employer's willingness" to hire homosexuals.....This law-school view of what "prejudices" must be stamped out may be contrasted with the more plebeian attitudes that apparently still prevail in the United States Congress, which has been unresponsive to repeated attempts to extend to homosexuals the protections of federal civil rights laws.....¹⁰⁹

The real “equal protection” question raised by *Romer* was not whether gays are to enjoy equality with heterosexuals notwithstanding the prejudices of Coloradans, but whether the prejudices of the villains, or ordinary Americans, are to enjoy equality with the prejudices of the Templars, the liberal elites. And the Court answered this question in the negative. The elites purport to stand for equality, but they stand for inequality inasmuch as they are privileged to shield their own prejudices from the scrutiny they

¹⁰⁹ *Romer v. Evans*, 517 U.S. 620, 652 (1996) (Scalia, J., dissenting).

routinely mete out to traditionalists. The Templars routinely avail themselves of the right to base their employment decisions on “irrational” factors like appearance, demeanor, or personality. These are not directly germane to job performance narrowly construed but are highly relevant to maintaining a workplace environment that reflects the Templars’ sensibilities and self-image. Yet this is a privilege they reserve for themselves alone. They believe themselves more tolerant than the villeins, but Justice Scalia was arguing that the Templars’ support for gay causes is an easy outlet for moral preening, not an expression of principled cosmopolitanism. For the cosmopolitanism is nowhere to be found where it would conflict with the Templars’ own prejudices.

Where liberals see a standoff between Enlightenment and dark intolerance, conservative claimants of cultural oppression see only a clash of prejudices. Where liberals argue that Amendment 2 placed a unique burden on homosexuals that was not suffered by heterosexuals, the claimants retort that the *invalidation* of Amendment 2 placed a unique burden on the villein culture that was not suffered by the Templar culture. Since “we are all liberals now,” the issue is not whether equality is preferable to inequality but how equality is to be applied. Liberalism is always pushed through indeterminate abstractions like equality, but the equality’s concrete implementation must always engender new forms of inequality. Liberals are blind to the self-righteous censoriousness that conservatives detect in them because they will not recognize that inequality will always be conserved in some shape or form and that they have merely chosen to conserve it in their own favor and then labeled this “progress.”

This drive to discover symmetry underneath ostensible asymmetry helps explain the mysterious alliance between conservatives and libertarians. Libertarian Randy Barnett writes that, by contrast with the “comprehensive moralists of the Right or Left,” libertarians “contend that we must place conceptual and institutional limits or constraints on the exercise of power, including the power to do good or to demand moral or virtuous conduct.”¹¹⁰ And so one might conclude, as per the conventional wisdom, that libertarianism stands equidistantly between liberalism and conservatism. Yet many self-professed libertarians are more greatly threatened by the “comprehensive moralists” of the Left than by those of the Right. Correlatively, many conservatives harbor greater animus toward liberals than toward libertarians even though both eschew traditional values.

The reason is that libertarians *help* conservatives unearth symmetry where liberals posit asymmetry. Endorsing the common law nuisance rule according to which an abnormally sensitive plaintiff cannot shut down a church bell which has always been there and never bothered anyone else, Richard

¹¹⁰ Randy E. Barnett, “The Moral Foundations of Modern Libertarianism,” in *Varieties of Conservatism in America*, ed. Peter Berkowitz (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004), pg. 74.

Epstein suggests the same principle is applicable to those who object to the words “under God” in public school recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance.¹¹¹ What the liberal upholds as his principled fealty to church-state separation is thus eviscerated of its idealistic content and reduced idiosyncratic irascibility, a personal aversion whose costs should not be foisted on others.

Similarly, Epstein takes issue with anti-discrimination laws, chalking them up to “the principle of *contra bonos mores*—namely, that ‘I don’t want to live in a society in which individuals can discriminate on the basis of race or pay below some minimum wage, and so on.’”¹¹² What the liberal holds out as the lofty principle of equal dignity—perhaps derived from John Rawls’s Original Position—the libertarian reduces to a parochial custom or folkway, like removing one’s hat in church. Conservatives find themselves endeared to libertarians because *libertarianism represents a secular perspective through which to conceptualize liberalism in the same terms that liberals would conceptualize conservatism*, as a agglomeration of subjective values indulged in disregard Barnett’s institutional and conceptual constraints. What liberals hold out as their conceptual constraints—public reason, the Original Position, and so forth—have been reduced to cheap rationalization for self-indulgent moralism, the same cheap rationalization that liberals always detect in conservatives.

5. Indelible Psychological Differences

Michael Savage recounts an experience at an Indian lunch buffet in “liberal Sausalito,” just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. Having “let [his] guard down” for an instant, he discovered that a “liberal-looking college girl” had cut in front of him in line. His instinct was to take her to task, but he decided to let it go, and she took full advantage:

Immediately I felt as though I was behind an old lady at the supermarket. Know what I’m saying? This liberal girl with a pierced lip is taking her sweet time at the buffet. I glance over my shoulder and watch the line backing up in the restaurant. She’s clueless. She’s personally examining every piece of food. Every grain of Basmati rice.

The whole time she has that smile, that coy smile liberals get in ethnic restaurants. I could see her pea brain trying to pinpoint the origins of each spice used by the Indian chef. I’m standing there boiling. I’m tempted to ask, “Have you ever eaten at a buffet?” I can see this great liberal education she received going to good use. She doesn’t even know the basic etiquette of a lunch line.

But I was being patient as the line moved at snail speed. The people behind me are wondering if she’s even past the rice yet. I began to fume. The canned background music with the Indian sitar was getting on my nerves and the tempura was building up inside me. All I wanted was that chicken jalfrezi, the prawn bhuna, and the rice. Maybe a piece of garlic naan.

¹¹¹ Richard A. Epstein, “Libertarianism and Character,” in *Varieties of Conservatism in America*, ed. Peter Berkowitz (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004), pgs., 82-83.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pg. 99.

But she, of course, positioned her fat behind so I couldn't even maneuver around her in the narrow hallway. At this point I know she is doing it on purpose. I know liberals in general do these things on purpose. Why do they do it? Just because they can. Just because they seem to enjoy jerking our chain and pushing our limits.

Whether it's in a buffet line, or a court of law, the liberals by their nature go to great extremes to work us over. Or, as you'll see, to work the system. In the end, our ability to maintain law and order is emasculated.¹¹³

Lionel Trilling famously observed that the conservatism of his day expressed itself, not in ideas, but "only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas."¹¹⁴ Whether or not that held true in the 1950s, the observation seems to now have an uncannily literal illustration in Michael Savage, who appears to be politicizing his personal irascibility in this assortment of seemingly unhinged associations. Notwithstanding their demonstrable creativity, conservative claimants of cultural oppression would be hard pressed to discover a left-analogue for a Michael Savage. While few conservatives share Savage's particular grievances, these grievances betray a broader conviction which most conservatives accept in some shape or form. And this is that liberalism is no mere political credo, but rather a general ethos shapes personalities and permeates the superficially apolitical minutiae of social life. This is what makes liberal encroachment so all-encompassing and conservative resistance so vital.

Nunberg observes that whereas the "culture wars" formerly denoted a conflict within high culture, referring to controversies about the National Endowment for the Arts and the canon, they have now come to denote to culture in the anthropological sense, as a conflict between competing ways of life.¹¹⁵ The suggestion is now that "conservatives and liberals are divided by indelible psychological differences, so that political disagreements are like bedside squabbles that can never be resolved rationally."¹¹⁶ Conservatives see liberal ideals as just outward expressions of a particular social identity.¹¹⁷ Liberalism is not a set of universal principles speaking to humanity as such, but a decadent lifestyle that can be associated with certain geographic regions, as in "Hollywood liberalism" or "Upper West Side liberalism,"¹¹⁸ or else with certain consumer preferences, like Volvos, brie, and café latte. As we saw, Goldberg accuses that, by contrast with conservatism, liberalism dictates "how to be, what to buy." The irony, however, is that this belief propels conservatives into the very left-wing conclusion that

¹¹³ Michael Savage, *The Enemy Within: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on our Schools, Faith, and Military* (Thomas Nelson, 2003), pg. 37.

¹¹⁴ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008) pg. xv

¹¹⁵ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 73.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. pg. 96.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pg. 70.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pg. 44.

“[e]verything....is ‘in the last analysis’ political”¹¹⁹ as Frederic Jameson famously declared. For exposing liberalism’s totalitarian ambitions requires conservatives to approach every sphere of social life as just another arena on which the encroachments of liberalism must be resisted, a continuous contest between the live-and-let-live, all-American individualism of conservatives and the preening censoriousness of their liberal overlords. Hence Savage’s buffet experience.

This *weltanschauung* is vividly illustrated in Mike Gallagher’s *50 Things Liberals Love to Hate*, a chronicle of the author’s 30 years of experience observing liberals. Gallagher explains that he has studied liberals “like Jane Goodall studies her chimps”—“In their natural habitats, and without judgment. In silence mostly, because we barely speak the same language.”¹²⁰ From this vast experience, Gallagher concludes that “[l]iberals love to hate things most Americans love, and spend the rest of their lives endlessly trying to take those things away from us,” convinced that “they do it all because they love us.”¹²¹ Thus, liberals hate McDonald’s because it stands as a symbol of some of America’s best qualities, “our entrepreneurial zeal, our ability to deliver high quality in a uniform way, our love of convenience and speed.”¹²² Liberals will justify their regulatory zeal as the pursuit of public health. But this is stealth and subterfuge once again. That they would exempt fancy, high-calorie coffee drinks from state control betrays that they are simply imposing their own lifestyle preferences on ordinary Americans.¹²³ Likewise, NASCAR upsets liberals because “everyone there is having a good time,” eating fatty food and listening to country music in utter indifference to liberal disapproval. Liberals despise NASCAR fans because they are symbols of the American renegade, the cultural descendants of those who conquered the West, didn’t wait for permission, and didn’t follow the rules.¹²⁴ Liberals’ contempt for the autonomy of the ordinary American also explains their contempt the great American steakhouse, where the food is always made to the customer’s specifications. By contrast, “liberal restaurants” will “assault” guests “with all sorts of rules and information,” forbidding substitutions, dictating how dishes may be served.¹²⁵ Where conservatives celebrate the individual, liberals worship the expert, who has colonized the culinary sphere no less than the legal, administrative, and educational ones. In every case, liberalism’s ultimate aim is the devitalization of the ordinary American. Hence liberals’ preference for environmentally friendly electric cars, their preference for a “sad little mound of plastic” with “zero-pick up” lacking the “power and thrust”

¹¹⁹2.

¹²⁰ Mike Gallagher, *50 Things Liberals Love to Hate* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2012), pg. 2.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 3.

¹²² *Ibid.*, pg. 8.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pg. 10.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 22.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 27.

of all-American gas guzzler. Liberals “want us to stop hitting the accelerator—on our cars, on our ambitions, on our appetites, on everything.”¹²⁶

Some conservatives will criticize this belief in “indelible psychological differences” as a populist perversion of true conservatism. But the belief is in fact consistent with some classical conservative ideas. Conservatives have long held that social and political life is sustained, not only by ideas, but more powerfully by the pre-reflective habits and mores that structure our lives in ways that resist formal codification. Hence what Burke called “wisdom without reflection.”¹²⁷ Amy Wax explains:

For Burke and Oakeshott, conceptual relationships have little to do with how customs and traditions function in the real world. Because the powers of human reason are severely limited, all but the most intellectually gifted are incapable of engaging in sustained, rigorous analysis or of thinking through problems without falling into error. The dilemmas of human existence are particularly resistant to rational analysis because social practices and traditions are not derived from first principles, but evolve over time by trial and error. Human action in society and politics operates not primarily through reasoning, but through adherence to prescriptive roles, customs, and habits continuously adjusted to the messy demands of day-to-day living. The test of behavioral rules is thus whether they work well in the real world as guides for human interaction rather than whether they conform precisely to syllogistic demands.¹²⁸

The rhetoric of conservative claims of cultural oppression is congruous with these premises. For liberals’ rationalistic devotion to first principles itself can itself be viewed as originating in largely unconscious prescriptive roles and habits, in forms of “day-to-day living” whose normative content resists rigorous conceptual analysis. And so it is unsurprising that the culture wars should have taken the anthropological turn described by Nunberg. Volvos, brie, and café latte may be poor starting points for unearthing the pre-reflective, pre-articulated mores of liberalism, but they are powerful symbols of conservatives’ conviction that these mores do indeed exist, their and that liberalism in general, just like social justice in particular, operates according to some undisclosed code that is only very partially revealed by its articulated principles.

Kimball’s juxtaposition of the “unspoken confidences” of old with the countercultural precepts that have by now seeped into “the realm of habit, taste, and feeling” suggests that ideas can be understood in terms of their pre-theoretical cultural embodiments. David Gelernter captures this thought in his suggestion that ideology “is a projection of your personality.” It is “*you* cast like a spotlight onto the cultural landscape in which you live.”¹²⁹ Liberalism and conservatism cannot be reduced to ideas because

¹²⁶ Ibid., pg. 236.

¹²⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O’Brien (Penguin Books, 1968), pg. 119.

¹²⁸ Amy L. Wax, *The Conservative’s Dilemma: Traditional Institutions, Social Change, and Same-Sex Marriage*, 42 San Diego L. Rev. 1059, 1068-69 (2005)

¹²⁹ Gelernter, *America Lite*, pgs. 130-31.

they are also ways of being—the “spotlight”—that first imbue ideas with their resonance for us. Political ideology is not just a cluster of principles through which events in the world are self-consciously conceptualized, but, like personality generally, the lens through which the world first appears to us prior to explicit belief-formation. The ad hominem of Savage, Gallagher, and others manifest just this conviction.

Gay conservative James Kirchick writes that while he has encountered some anti-gay bigotry among his fellow right-wingers, the greatest vitriol has always come from those who believe that it is “the duty of each and every homosexual to sign up with the checklist of liberal policies.”¹³⁰ Anti-conservative prejudice is no less pernicious than anti-gay prejudice, for

[B]eing gay is not unlike being conservative, in that both, I believe, are an expression of an individual’s most basic humanity. To be sure, one’s political viewpoints can and almost always do evolve, in a way that one’s sexuality does not...But for those of us right-of-center gay people who take politics seriously and see it as the expression of deeply felt values, arguing on behalf of causes in which we genuinely don’t believe would be like trying to make love to someone of the opposite gender. In this sense, politics is very much about human nature.”¹³¹

Kirchick does not suggest that political disagreements cannot be resolved rationally. Yet the comparison with sexual attraction, which clearly cannot be, reveals his sense that political conviction is deeper than dialectic. This is why conservatives can charge conservaphobia. Their conservatism may not qualify as an “immutable trait” like race or sexual orientation. But it is nevertheless irreducible to mere theory, and this is why it provokes the savage incivility of liberals, which is ultimately directed at something more primordial than ideas. This is why Kirchick can posit an equivalency between anti-gay conservatives and anti-conservative gays. It is because conservatives see liberalism and conservatism as pre-theoretical ways of being that they can trace political disagreement to cultural class conflict between a quasi-ethnic community of ordinary Americans and condescending foreigners who “just don’t get it.” Though some conservatives will dismiss talk of “latte liberals” as an unfortunate distraction from more serious issues, conservatives are all united in the suspicion that liberals hide behind a façade of disingenuous rationalism that conceals their ethnocentric hostility toward ordinary Americans.

Borrowing from John Podhoretz, *National Review*’s Jay Nordlinger explains that conservatives are “bilingual.” Unlike liberals, conservatives can speak “both conservative and liberal.” For liberals “can go a long time without brushing up against someone who’s conservative.” By contrast, conservatives “are more used to being around liberals, because liberals have dominated everything in our lives, especially

¹³⁰ James Kirchick, *The Consistency of Gay Conservatives*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010), pg. 83.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 81.

our schools.”¹³² The conservative is thus akin to the proverbial Latino immigrant or first-generation American, who is immersed in white/Anglo ways at work or school but is also anchored in a foreign language and culture affording him a special perspective unavailable to monocultural natives. In a similar ethnicization of political difference, Goldberg compares conservatives to Blacks, Canadians, and Jews. These groups make for some of the best comedians because they are “each in their own way, insider-outsiders” who “share both a fascination with and alienation from mainstream American culture.” Conservatives are in much the same position because they must master their own culture while also learning to live in an alienating majority culture dominated by liberals.¹³³

These formulations are no accident. However stridently conservatives may insist that conservatism is about ideas and winning a war of ideas, their own conceptualizations betray their sense that more is at stake. If conservatives understand liberals better than liberals understand conservatives, the reason is not that conservatives are better acquainted with Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* than are liberals with Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* but that conservatives cannot help “being around” and “brushing up against” liberals, as Nordlinger says. Merely brushing up against liberals can yield insight because their articulated liberalism is continuous with a pre-political ethos that can be grasped intuitively in everyday encounter.

Seen in this light, even the outrageousness of a Michael Savage admits of an intellectually charitable interpretation. It follows from the “spotlight theory” of political ideology that the impulses of liberalism have become refracted, not only in normative arguments, but in everyday attitudes, including perhaps attitudes toward ethnic groups and the like. Savage’s attitude toward his liberal looking girl’s body language was irascible, but that irascibility may in turn bespeak a heightened attunement to what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “imperceptible cues of bodily *hexis*.”¹³⁴ Bodily *hexis*, Bourdieu explains, is “political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*.”¹³⁵ That disposition constitutes a “pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic” and which, “charged with a host of social meanings and values,” permits these “to pass from practice to practice without going through discourse or consciousness.”¹³⁶ Our pre-verbal comportment can carry political significance because it is the

¹³² Qt. in Cupp and Joshpe, *Why You’re Wrong about the Right*, pg. 80.

¹³³ Jonah Goldberg, *Introduction*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010), pgs x–xi.

¹³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge 1977), pg. 82.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 93.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 87.

physiological and instinctual embodiments of what is only later reflected upon as ideas. This liberal-looking girl's "coy smile," then, may be but the temperamental and physiological embodiment her broader social worldview. Her self-absorbed preoccupation with the texture of ethnic grains may be just one expression of a permanent bodily disposition that pre-reflectively embodies what is later theorized as multiculturalism. It is the pre-political manifestation of a "political mythology." This anti-rationalism place what liberals dismiss as conservatives' unhinged paranoia in a new light. Liberals cannot fathom how conservatives can feel continuously "worked over" by them, as Savage says, but this may be because their rationalism insures them to the bodily *hexis* to which conservatives are better attuned. What liberals dismiss as the "irritable mental gestures" of conservatives might be their *reaction* to a layer of social meaning that liberal rationalism cannot acknowledge.

Writing in *Proud to be Right*—an anthology of introspective essays by a new generation of emerging young conservatives—Hellen Rittelmeyer explains that her cohort at Yale "smoked on principle" and were bothered by smoking bans, which undeservedly "gave the modern cult of health the force of law." Reacting to this, she and her friends chose to embody conservative values rather than articulate them, which is what smoking allowed them to do. For reasons they never quite understood, "smoking felt like rebellion against Yale's moral consensus that the two most important things in life are for everyone to be happy and for everyone to get along."¹³⁷ These sentiments are entirely unintelligible to liberals, who cannot discern any relationship between nicotine addiction and either liberalism or conservatism. Yet Rittelmeyer is hardly the first conservative to have attacked liberalism for its allegedly puritanical hostility to smoking. On the contrary, this is a recurring theme of conservative claims of cultural oppression. Christopher Lasch articulates the basic intuition:

Upper-middle-class liberals, with their inability to grasp the importance of class differences in shaping attitudes toward life, fail to reckon with the class dimension of their obsession with health and moral uplift. They find it hard to understand why their hygienic conception of life fails to command universal enthusiasm. They have mounted a crusade to sanitize American society: to create a "smoke-free environment," to censor everything from pornography to "hate speech," and at the same time, incongruously, to extend the range of personal choice in matters where most people feel the need of solid moral guidelines. When confronted with resistance to these initiatives, they betray the venomous hatred that lies not far beneath the smiling face of upper-middle-class benevolence.¹³⁸

Conservatives can see themselves as on the whole more tolerant than liberals because they equate liberalism with a "hygienic conception of life" that variously manifests itself in a wide range of spheres.

¹³⁷ Helen Rittelmeyer, *The Smoker's Code*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010), pgs. 173-77.

¹³⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), pg. 28.

Smoking can qualify as a political act because it is a rebellion against this conception. To smoke at Yale is to reject the devil's bargain of liberalism, whose unrelenting pursuit of health, safety, civility, and cooperation stifles the natural freedom of the human spirit—whether through political correctness, business regulation, or another way. This is why smoking can qualify as political resistance.

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression understand liberalism in much the same way that feminists understand patriarchy or post-colonial multiculturalists understand Eurocentrism: It is not just a just a set of political aims but an overarching ethos and narrative of which the explicitly political aims are only one expression, and not always the most important one. Liberalism inheres, not only in its principles and policies, but in the pre-reflective mores of the ambient culture, which is what prepares the population for those principles and policies. Elite institutions first inculcate “progressive attitudes” through various mechanisms of cultural propaganda, thereby creating fertile terrain for the onslaught of state regulation, which then formalizes the informal web of coercions to which these institutions first accustom people. While liberals will never shy away from judicial and bureaucratic interventions, their liberalism is in the first instance enforced in more mundane ways, through everyday pressures and stigmas serving to steadily wear down conservative resistance.

This being the nature of the beast, resistance to liberalism cannot be confined to electioneering, and may be undertaken in everyday life. In flouting the unspoken mores of liberalism, conservative claims of cultural oppression provoke and thereby expose the “the venomous hatred that lies not far underneath the smiling face of upper middle-class benevolence.” Liberals may dismiss Rittelmeyer's smoking as just plain stupid. But smoking at Yale is to the conservative claimant of cultural oppression what burning a bra was to the 1970s feminist, nothing that was ever intended to constitute an eloquent statement of philosophical principle, but rather a go-for-the-gut challenge to taken-for-granted social understandings. It is not a substitute for ideas, but an attempt to raise the kind of consciousness without which certain ideas cannot even be entertained.

6. The Half-Savage Relic of Past Times

Will Kymlicka observes that while contemporary liberals urge an attitude of neutrality toward culture, casting cultural membership as a private matter which the state should neither promote nor obstruct, nineteenth-century liberals approached culture altogether differently. Some liberals wanted cultural homogeneity while others defended the multinational state. But none dismissed culture as a purely private affair. Those who refused to recognize the rights of minority cultures did so, not because they rejected the idea of an official culture, but because they wanted only one official culture. Moreover,

“the call for a common national identity was often tied to an ethnocentric denigration of small national groups.” It was common to distinguish “great nations” like France, Italy, Poland, Germany, Hungary, Spain, England, and Russia, from smaller, mere “nationalities” like the Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Basques, Welsh, Scots, Serbians, Bulgarians, Romanians, and Slovenes. Whereas the former were upheld as the civilized carriers of historical progress, the latter were denigrated as “primitive and stagnant, and incapable of social or cultural development.” And so some nineteenth-century liberals endorsed national independence for great nations but coercive assimilation for smaller nationalities. No less than John Stuart Mill opined that “it was undeniably better for a Scottish Highlander to be part of Great Britain, or for a Basque to be part of France, than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world.”¹³⁹

Liberals now shudder at such ethnocentrism. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression suspect that an analogous ethnocentrism persists in the attitudes of metropolitan elites toward America’s conservative heartland. By contrast with places like New York, Boston, or San Francisco, conservative regions of America are denigrated as revolving in their “own little mental orbit,” as “primitive and stagnant.” Laura Ingraham writes that Middle America reminds the elites “of those maps of Africa used by nineteenth-century explorers that were blank in the middle—to signify “Terra Incognita,” the Unknown Land. The explorers thought cannibals lived there; the elites, on the other hand, believe a mysterious tribe known as *Redneckus Americanus* occupies these strange lands.”¹⁴⁰ The liberal elites will denounce real or imagined racism and xenophobia at every turn. But Ingraham these are the same people “who don’t hesitate to slip into (bad) southern drawls to ridicule Southerners.” Indeed, “[m]ocking the pickup truck-driving, tobacco-chewing, shotgun-owning South is one of the elite rites of passage.”¹⁴¹

Ingraham’s accusations are fully consistent with the assumptions of nineteenth-century liberalism. The liberal elites will chalk up complaints of conservaphobia to conservative self-pity. But the alternative hypothesis is that conservaphobia is a contemporary variant of an ethnocentrism that was once considered fully compatible with liberalism. The ethnocentrism is no longer acknowledged, to be sure. But this may be because what previously transpired on the level of avowed ideals has been transposed onto the realm of feeling and sensibility, where it can be felt by the target but denied by the perpetrator. If conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe they are separated from the liberal

¹³⁹ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pg. 53.

¹⁴⁰ Ingraham, *Shut Up & Sing*, pg. 19;

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 30.

elites by “indelible psychological differences,” one reason is their sense that this message has already been broadcast to them by the liberal elites themselves and that they are merely articulating what the elites are content to insinuate. Liberals will dismiss “identity politics” as an unfortunate obsession of emotionally immature right-wingers. But the claimants insist that liberals are just as concerned to assert their own identities and cultural preeminence, and merely do so through stealth and subterfuge, under the cover of plausible deniability.

Nevertheless, the elites’ ethnocentrism cannot be fully concealed is recognizable to those who care to see it. Victor Davis Hanson observes:

Obama represents their utopian dreams where an anointed technocracy, exempt from the messy ramifications of its own ideology, directs from on high a socially just society — diverse, green, non-judgmental, neutral abroad, tribal at home — in which an equality of result is ensured, albeit with proper exemptions for the better educated and more sophisticated, whose perks are necessary to give them proper downtime for their exhausting work on our behalf.

Whom does the liberal elite detest? Not the very poor. Not the middle class. Not the conservative wealthy of like class. Mostly it is the Sarah-Palin-type grasping want-to-be’s (thus the vicious David Letterman jokes or Katie Couric animus or Bill Maher venom).

Those of the entrepreneurial class who own small businesses (‘you didn’t build that’), who send their kids to San Diego State rather than Stanford, who waste their ill-gotten gains on jet skis rather than skis and on Winnebagos rather than mountain climbing equipment, who employ 10 rather than 10,000, and who vacation at Pismo Beach rather than Carmel. The cool of Obama says to the very wealthy, “I’m one of you. See you again next summer on the Vineyard.”

Obama signals to the elite that he too is bothered by those non-arugula-eating greedy losers who are xenophobic and angry that the world left them behind, who are without tastes and culture, who are materialistic to the core, and who are greedy in their emphases on the individual — the tea-baggers, the clingers, the Cliven Bundy Neanderthals, the Palins in their Alaska haunts, and the *Duck Dynasty* freaks. These are not the sort of successful people that we want the world to associate with America, not when we have suitably green, suitably diverse zillionaires who know where to eat in Paris.¹⁴²

If it is important that the people representing America to the world know where to eat in Paris, this is because the culture wars are less a struggle between two opposed visions of America than between those who actually retain a distinctive vision of American and the liberal elites, colonial overseers who look to Europe for a model of a true civilization and judge their fellow Americans accordingly. O’Reilly says that the culture wars are a battlefield on which “the armies of the traditionalists” who “believe the United States was well founded and has done enormous good for the world” confront “the committed forces of the secular-progressive movement” who would “transform America in the image of Western Europe.”¹⁴³

¹⁴² <http://pjmedia.com/victordavishanson/lord-obama/>

¹⁴³ O’Reilly, *Culture Warrior*, pg. 2.

While conservative claimants of cultural oppression endorse “Eurocentrism” insofar as it is opposed to the native traditions of various Third World peoples, they oppose it insofar as it is opposed to the native traditions of the ordinary American, a “half-savage relic of past times” and the new target of colonialist condescension. With Europe having more fully embraced things like secularism, the welfare state, gun control, and opposition to the death penalty, it serves the liberal elites as a shining counter-example to America’s traditionalistic backwardness, the model of urbane sophistication against which to judge all of America’s “non-arugula-eating greedy losers.” The elites, says Ingraham, believe they have “outgrown America.”¹⁴⁴ Embarrassed by America’s backwardness and parochialism, they continually “apologize for our brutish attitudes and policies to their elitist comrades around the world.”¹⁴⁵ With their unabashed patriotism, religiosity, and individualism, ordinary Americans are seen as badly brought-up children whose poor manners shame their parents in public. They are not part of the conversation but the objects of the conversation.

The elites will retort that European social policies just happen to cohere with their own philosophical commitments and that this is hardly anti-American. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe that liberal antipathy toward the patriotism of the ordinary American is visceral rather than principled. “Among [leftist] Airheads,” writes Gelernter, “patriotism is simply vulgar, like trailer parks or Christianity.”¹⁴⁶ Ingraham notes that the elites are driven to a frenzy, growing “angry, bitter, and belligerent” at the spectacle of Americans holding their hands over their hearts as the Star Spangled Banner is played. That it is indeed the perceived *vulgarity* of American patriotism which offends can, Ingraham suggests, be inferred from liberals’ admiration for former French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin, whom they looked to as the kind of intelligent, responsible statesman that America lacked during the George W. Bush years. But this was the same de Villepin who avowed that “[t]here is not a day that goes by without me feeling the imperious need to...advance further in the name of French ambition.” De Villepin also wrote a biography of Napoleon, endorsing his philosophy of “Victory or death, but glory whatever happens.” President Bush never uttered anything as jingoistic or bellicose. And yet the elites dismissed him as “arrogant, stupid, greedy, corrupt, and a unilateralist.”¹⁴⁷ Why? The double-standard proves that the elites are more concerned with cultural credentials than with moral substance. De Villepin was a debonair Parisian sophisticate who wrote books while Bush was a rude and crude want-to-be cowboy from Texas. Those who bear the appropriate markers of cultural distinction and validate the elites

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pg.s. 2-3.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pg. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Gelernter, *America Lite*, pg. 151.

¹⁴⁷ Ingraham, *Shut Up & Sing*, pg. 329.

Europhilic pretensions are given a free moral pass while those who patriotically embrace American interests are condemned as the half-savage relics of past times—not because the interests are illegitimate, but because the crass earnestness of their patriotism is viscerally repugnant to liberal sensibilities.

The liberal elites simply refuse to acknowledge the hidden parochialism of what they imagine is their superior cultural sophistication. Ingraham writes:

If you're an elitist who's spent his entire career working for the Ford Foundation, the *New York Times*, or a Hollywood studio, concepts like valor, bravery, and sacrifice are probably alien to you. You don't take them seriously, you don't know anyone who does, and you naturally think that anyone who does profess to live by them must be mentally defective, even evil.¹⁴⁸

Valor, bravery, and sacrifice are suspect because they are fundamentally incompatible with the elites' "hygienic conception of life." And so these virtues must be discredited as raw anger or aggression, the dangerous seeds of fanatical nationalism and xenophobia. But conservatives believe that the elites' apprehensions merely betray the elites' corrupting gentility, which blinds them to the virtues they lack. The elites will always frame their concerns in moral terms. But this framing is just a post-hoc rationalizations for their visceral antipathy to the virtues of the ordinary American, who will not accede to the liberal model of a properly civilized personality. Mistaking the halls of the Ford Foundation for the entire world, liberals cannot see that their high ideals come hand in hand with a primordial hatred for the outsider and all he represents. t

Dissenting in *United States v. Virginia*, which held unconstitutional the Virginia Military Institute's policy of excluding women, Justice Scalia writes "In an odd sort of way, it is precisely VMI's attachment to such old-fashioned concepts as manly 'honor' that has made it, and the system it represents, the target of those who today succeed in abolishing public single-sex education."¹⁴⁹ Writing for the Court, Justice Ginsburg had assumed the posture of the hard-nosed technocrat painstakingly scrutinizing the facts before her, asking how much evidence is required to prove that women cannot adapt to a VMI education. But Justice Scalia's suggestion is that the narrow terms of Equal Protection review conceal the true stakes. Those who pushed to overturn VMI's historical traditions were concerned, not to uproot irrational preconceptions about women's capabilities, but to advance an agenda of social engineering, to discredit an ideal that they despise as archaic and benighted. Liberals will chalk up their reservations about "manly honor" to concerns about sexism and gender inequality. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression trace this high-mindedness to a specific cultural ethos. "It is male individuality, exuberance, and

¹⁴⁸ Ingraham, *Shut Up & Sing*, pg. 150.

¹⁴⁹ *United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 601 (U.S. 1996) (Scalia J., dissenting)..

aggressiveness,” writes F. Carolyn Graglia, “that must be most stringently curbed and disciplined to meet the requirements of bureaucratic success.” Bureaucracies are “more hospitable to the effete, androgynous male who fits the feminist mold of manhood.”¹⁵⁰ Liberals oppose manly honor, not to promote gender equality, but by virtue of their primordial attraction to the disciplined conformism of a bureaucratic, institutional ethos. A hygienic conception of life cannot tolerate male individuality, exuberance, and aggressiveness, which are now condemned as dangerous atavisms. Here as elsewhere, conservative claimants of cultural oppression see the political as emerging out of the ostensibly apolitical. Where the elites contrapose equality to inequality, conservatives see a contest between what the elites insist is their higher civilization and the half-savage relics of past times, conservatives.

Hence the selectivity with which feminist principles are actually applied. Ingraham notes that while a global rap superstar can “get away with carrying out a simulated rape of a young woman on the stage,” such shenanigans would have provoked a deafening outcry from elites had they been performed by American soldiers stationed in Iraq or Afghanistan. The performance would be cited as incontrovertible evidence of the military’s misogynistic culture.¹⁵¹ Why the double-standard? Liberals’ assessments of social ills are never formulated in a Platonic heaven, but always against the backdrop of the elites’ tastes and sensibilities. Where these tastes and sensibilities are rejected, as in the military, the violence and sexism will be moralistically condemned as uniquely nefarious and brutishly animal. Where they are embraced, as by multicultural black rappers, the criticism will be much more “nuanced” and “sophisticated,” with concessions granted to the requirements of artistic license and multilayered ironic social commentary. Liberals’ core commitments are presented in the language of abstract principles, but these principles’ true function as actually applied is always to discredit the ethos of the ordinary American, which is an affront to the liberal identity.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression offer a vulgarized and politicized recapitulation of what Norbert Elias famously characterized as the antithesis between *Kultur* and *Civilization*. Reacting to the prestige of French ideas and styles and the general perception of German backwardness and parochialism, German thinkers from the mid-eighteenth century onward asserted that France offered mere *Civilization*, an uprooted, artificial cosmopolitanism without inner spiritual substance, just “the external and superficial manners to be found in the courts.”¹⁵² Germany, on the other hand, offered *Kultur*, a fount of authentic spirituality and true feeling. In opposing their own “natural” way of life to the “unnatural” life

¹⁵⁰ F. Carolyn Graglia, *Domestic Tranquility: A Brief Against Feminism* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1998), pg. 280.

¹⁵¹ Laura Ingraham, *Power to the People* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2007), pg. 239-40.

¹⁵² Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford and Cambridge, Blackwell, 1994), pg. 8

of court society, German youths embracing Romanticism celebrated “an overwhelming delight in their own exuberance of feeling,” the “surrender to the excitement of one’s own heart, unhindered by ‘cold reason.’”¹⁵³

Where today’s liberal elites have *Civilization*, so conservatives have *Kultur*. For conservative claims of cultural oppression promote the same basic contraposition of human characteristics that has always defined the *Kultur/Civilization* dichotomy, the contrast between “depth” and “superficiality,” “honesty” and “falsity,” “true virtue” and “outward politeness.”¹⁵⁴ Hence O’Reilly’s juxtaposition of the secular-progressives of Los Angeles who say “Let’s do lunch, babe” with no intention making good on the promise with the instinctive sincerity of the conservative “Tradition-Warrior.” Not every “T-Warrior” can be a full-time activist, but he already contributes to the cause by just being a “standup guy” who rejects the “phony jargon.”¹⁵⁵ The Ford Foundation, the *New York Times*, and Hollywood are just the latest iterations of the “unnatural” life of court society, of the unhealthy self-consciousness and other-directedness that now stands in sharp contrast to those who pour their hearts out singing the Star-Spangled Banner, surrendering to the excitement of their hearts “unhindered by ‘cold reason.’”

It follows that what purport to be disinterested moral and aesthetic judgments will be systematically inflected by liberals’ preference for their own *Civilization* over conservative *Kultur*. And this is indeed what conservatives discern. Anderson notes that the liberal press condemned Comedy Central’s *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn*—which “regularly upbraided the Left for its anti-Americanism and its stifling PC piety”—as boorish, offensive, and racist. But their offense was a direct reflection of their own parochialism, expressing that this particular brand of comedy is “far removed from the traditional New York-style (i.e., liberal, guilt-ridden, psychoanalysis-saturated) comedy of Woody Allen.”¹⁵⁶ Here as elsewhere, liberalism is not just a narrow political creed but an overarching ethos, a debilitating introspectiveness that stands opposed to the healthy, all-American exuberance of the conservative, of the ordinary American, who must therefore be discredited at all costs. Hence liberals’ double-standards, which operate in the service of this enterprise.

Michelle Malkin describes a Democratic Fundraiser in Chelsea where one comic attacked President Bush as “this piece of living, breathing shit” and others “took to savaging Vice President Dick Cheney’s family,” calling his lesbian daughter “a big lezzie.”¹⁵⁷ Yet the media gives these kinds of outrages

¹⁵³ Ibid., pg. 15-16.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 24.

¹⁵⁵ O’Reilly, *Culture Warrior*, pg. 197.

¹⁵⁶ Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, pgs. 88,91.

¹⁵⁷ Michelle Malkin, *Unhinged: Exposing Liberals Gone Wild* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005), pg. 138.

a free pass. Why? “It’s like an Upper West Side Manhattan left-wing Ku Klux Klan mentality,” explains Republican Congressman Peter King of New York: “[I]f some Southern redneck talked like this about a liberal, everyone would denounce it. But because it’s Upper West Side humor, somehow it’s supposed to be chic.”¹⁵⁸ Benefitting from this Upper West Side privilege, liberal comedians can issue mock death threats against prominent conservatives and expect everyone to take it as good clean fun. But conservatives who would turn the tables and do the same to prominent liberals cannot expect the same indulgence.¹⁵⁹ Liberals, observes Hannity, dismiss their own mock death threats as “ironic jokes.” But no such defense is available to those who will not participate in their culture of irony.

The double-standards infect the movie industry as well. D’Souza notes that liberals celebrate violence “when it appears in movies that promote liberal or avant-garde values, such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Natural Born Killers*, or *Kill Bill*” but deplore it “when it appears in a movie that promotes traditional religious faith, such as Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*.”¹⁶⁰ As with nationalism, the issue is never violence as such, but the cultural sensibilities it serves to validate. Where those sensibilities are traditionalist, the violence is deplored as prurient sadomasochism. Where they are avant-garde, it is exalted as philosophical insight into the darkest corners of human nature or the anomie of modern life. Liberals are presumed to enjoy intellectual detachment from whatever violence they contemplate. But conservatives are deemed half-savage relics of past times, potentially unhinged and on the precipice of violence. And so the slightest intimations of real or imagined violence in their ranks must be preemptively exposed and upbraided.

Michael Savage was summarily fired from a new job at MSNBC after he lost his temper and, as he explains, “react[ed] to a vicious personal attack made by a *crank caller*” by telling the caller to “get AIDS and die.” But NPR’s Nina Totenberg, Savage notes, could respond to Senator’s Jesse Helms efforts to reduce AIDS research funding with “I think he ought to be worried about what’s going on in the Good Lord’s mind, because if there is retributive justice, he’ll get AIDs from a transfusion, or one of his grandchildren will get it.”¹⁶¹ Totenberg was *not* fired. Why the double-standard? The contexts are different, but the contents are similar enough to raise the question, and Savage is suggesting that part of the context was Totenberg’s class privilege as a liberal elite. Whereas she was attacking a conservative,

¹⁵⁸ Sean Hannity, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty over Liberalism* (New York HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), pg. 232.

¹⁵⁹ Malkin, *Unhinged*, pgs. 160-61.

¹⁶⁰

¹⁶¹ Michael Savage, *The Enemy Within: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on our Schools, Faith, and Military* (Thomas Nelson, 2003), pg. 219.

Savage was attacking a critic of a conservative. And whereas Totenberg delivered her remarks in the calm, deliberative tone of a well-spoken NPR host, thus evincing a “hygienic conception of life,” Savage delivered his in the gruff, working-class accent of the ordinary American. *This* is what the elites ultimately despise.

Liberals claim to stand for civility and would denounce as a dangerous fanatic any conservative who called for divine retribution against *the grandchildren* of a political enemy. Yet Totenberg was permitted to get away with just this. The call for divine retribution just seems more thoughtful, less primitive and barbaric when voiced by a liberal—just as *Natural Born Killers* seems more thoughtful, less primitive and barbaric than *The Passion of the Christ*. The animus of liberals just seems more civilized, more temperate than the animus of conservatives. But this is because civility has no less than religious neutrality and moral censoriousness been defined by the dominant dispensation. Liberals aver that they enforce only an overlapping consensus of basic values to which all reasonable minds can accede. But conservatives insist that this commitment is vitiated by sectarian preferences that liberals will not acknowledge. Being culturally credentialed as sophisticated cosmopolitans, liberals could not possibly mean what they say. But as atavistic barbarians, conservatives probably do and so cannot be permitted to indulge in the full range of questionable human impulses allowed to liberals. This has always been liberalism’s *modus operandi*. 1960s anti-Vietnam dissident William Sloane Coffin propounded his “rule of conscience,” which according to Kimball meant that Klansmen but not Weathermen should be arrested for their crimes. For “law was dispensable when it conflicted with duly ratified liberal sentiments.”¹⁶² Laws “may be violated if, and only if, one is a member of the elite.”¹⁶³ The Weathermen are no longer and the Klan is no longer relevant. But the legacy of the 1960s lives on in the very fabric of our culture, as *Chronicles* says, privileging liberals at every turn.

7. Stockholm Syndrome

Conservative claims of cultural oppression strike liberals as more than a tad melodramatic. Indeed, there has been much disagreement about whether a culture war even exists in America. As a particular characterization of what that war consists in, conservative claims of cultural oppression presuppose an affirmative answer to this question. Some commentators have argued that the image of stark polarization between progressives and traditionalists does not bear close scrutiny because most Americans are more moderate and non-ideological than the culture war’s rhetoricians would have us

¹⁶² Kimball, Long March, pg. 136.

¹⁶³ Ibid., pg. 135.

believe. Most notably, Alan Wolfe argues that the culture war is a creation of media and political elites, and that their deeply divisive ideological rhetoric says more about their own agendas than any powerful currents running through the electorate. If cultural issues seem to loom larger than before, this is because of culturally extrinsic factors like the ideological homogenization of political parties, gerrymandering techniques that give incumbents the electoral security to vote their ideology, and low primary election turnouts that give candidates an incentive to mobilize ideologically driven voters. With the base of the Republican Party being especially far removed from the American center, Republicans have held a special interest in perpetuating the culture wars myth.¹⁶⁴ The voices of most Americans are moderate, but structural features of our political system ensure that the shrillest voices are heard the loudest.

On the other hand, James Hunter has countered that Wolfe's argument assumes one debatable interpretation of the culture wars question. Culture war skepticism appears motivated by "an implicit view of culture" that reduces culture to the amalgam of individual opinion—that is, the kind of thing easily measured by the poll data that seem to indicate centrism rather than polarization.¹⁶⁵ This is a "culture of politics" orientation that directs our attention to the "push and pull of the mechanisms of power over cultural issues"—that is, to elections, campaigns, administrations, voting behaviors, etc. With culture thus conceived, it is easy to dismiss the culture wars as the purview of small cadres of activists.¹⁶⁶ But the culture wars hypothesis becomes more plausible once we eschew this methodological individualism and conceive of culture "not as the norms and values residing in people's heads and hearts but rather as systems of symbols and other cultural artifacts, institutions that produce and promulgate those symbols, discourses that articulate and legitimate particular interests, and competing fields where culture is contested."¹⁶⁷ This "politics of culture" orientation addresses itself, not to specific strategies of political mobilization, but to the symbolic dimensions of those mobilizations, to "the nature and institutional structures and dynamics of the discourse" and the "competing sources of authority that animate the conflict."¹⁶⁸ Whereas the "culture of politics" orientation implicitly conceives of "culture" as shorthand for the sum total of different individuals' political opinions, the "politics of culture" perspective assigns culture a *sui generis* reality, as the source of those opinions' resonance.

¹⁶⁴ James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, *Is There A Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*, eds. E.J. Dionne Jr. and Michael Cromartie (Washington D.C.: Brooking Institution Press, 2006), pg. 46-53.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 20.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* pgs. 90-91.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 20.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 90-91.

So understood, our culture is indeed pervaded by deep-seated rifts. Bona fide culture warriors may be a minority, but this is a minority that promulgates the languages of our politics. And these languages are what provide “the categories through which people understand themselves.” They are what carry the power “to objectify, to make identifiable and ‘objectively’ real the various and ever changing aspects of our experience.”¹⁶⁹ It is because these are the stakes that we can speak of culture war. A literal war may be real and socially transformative notwithstanding that only a small portion of the populace is actually mobilized as combatants. And likewise, a culture war can be genuine notwithstanding that the population as a whole is not divided within itself with the same intensity as are the activists, because it is the activists who set the terms of the discussion. The ostensible centrism of the average American does not vitiate the culture war hypothesis because that centrism is not an alternative to the culture wars but *its product*. Centrism is itself defined by the culture wars, as a set of partial and pragmatic concessions to each side that may assuage the self-divisions they wreak but does not resolve them in any philosophically principled manner.

Most Americans, Hunter observes, adopted “middling positions” with respect to civil rights and Vietnam. Yet these were pivotal social conflicts with profound implications for the future of the country.¹⁷⁰ Someone who favored desegregation but preferred that it proceed at a slower, less destabilizing pace could not be said to have transcended the sharp ideological divide separating segregationists and civil rights activists. For his moderation was simply a way of managing that divide. Similarly, the culture wars moderate who suggests that abortion remain legal only for the first trimester of a pregnancy, or that the state be permitted to fund students’ transportation to religious schools but not these schools’ teacher salaries, has not discovered a genuine “third way” between traditionalism and progressivism. Whatever arguments he may muster must selectively trade on both side’s ideological impulses, without providing a different language through which to escape them. However large the “center” may be numerically, it is not, Hunter says, a “vital center,” and is rather “mostly passive and contentless.”¹⁷¹ The moderate is moderate because he has passively internalized the culture war into himself rather than taken one of its sides. This is why he remains the perennial target of activists who are always eyeing the possibility of disrupting the unstable, because unprincipled, *modus vivendi* to which he has thus far resigned himself.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. pg. 28.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., pg. 31.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pg. 93.

At their more sophisticated, conservative claims of cultural oppression embrace a “politics of culture” orientation, and so are not incompatible what Wolfe and others highlight as the centrism or moderation of most Americans. Some conservative claimants of cultural oppression do indeed trade on apocalyptic imagery, positing two opposing armies pitted against one another on an open battlefield. But many others reject this as an oversimplification. Himmelfarb explains that the two cultures that divide America are not “fixed, reified entities” but “loose categories of concepts representing a complex of values and beliefs which are shared, not entirely but in good measure, by ‘like-minded’ people.”¹⁷² The dominant culture actually “exhibits a wide spectrum of beliefs and practices.” The “elite culture,” which includes the media and academia, exists at one end of it. But that elite is “only a small if a most visible and influential part of this culture,” most of which consists “of people who are generally passive and acquiescent.” These people “lead lives that, in most respects, most of the time, conform to traditional ideals of morality and propriety.” But they do so “with no firm confidence in the principles underlying their behavior” and are for this reason “vulnerable to weaknesses and stresses in their own lives, and undermined by the example of their less conventional peers or those whom they might think of as their superiors.”¹⁷³

Moderates are moderates, not because they have somehow risen above the fray of the culture wars, but because they are its victims, submerged in the confusion it has created. The tolerance and nonjudgmentalism of the ordinary American, which Wolfe cites as evidence for the contrived character of culture wars vehemence, is for Himmelfarb an indication of the inroads made by the elites’ moral relativism, the demoralization of one belligerent by another.¹⁷⁴ If liberals cannot recognize the existence of a culture war, this is because their interpretation of the data accepts the triumph of liberalism as a given, rather than as something that has been foisted on people who reject liberalism in their heart of hearts.

D’Souza makes the same point more directly. Eschewing any facile dichotomy between “a decadent liberal coastline and a virtuous conservative heartland,” he explains that “[l]iberal values have penetrated the heartland,” proving that “liberals are the dominant side in the ‘culture war.’”¹⁷⁵ The moderation and ambivalence that some would construe as evidence for the contrived nature of the culture wars is really evidence for the victory of one of the belligerents, evidence that erstwhile conservatives have progressively capitulated to liberal sensibilities in a rejection of their own heritage.

¹⁷² Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures*, pg. 126.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, pg. 119.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 135-137.

¹⁷⁵ D’Souza, *Enemy at Home*, pg. 134-35.

The poll data may indicate widespread moderation and centrism. But those data underdetermine their interpretation, underdetermines whether that moderation and centrism is philosophically principled or a reflection of an apathetic and exhausted ambivalence adopted in the face of liberal hegemony, which has “penetrated” their own communities, as D’Souza would say. The ideologically strident minority of conservatives we associate with the culture wars are not, as culture war skeptics would have it, a parochial interest group with a loud megaphone, but rather those few individuals who, having somehow survived the initial onslaught, continue to resist the incursions of liberalism against the odds. If they seem like a fringe element, this is because liberalism has exalted its own contingent victories as the baselines through which to separate the fringe from the mainstream.

* * *

These assessments might be dismissed as ad hoc rationalizations for the fact that a great many Americans do not share the claimants’ enthusiasms, and specifically their sense of righteous resistance before an overbearing liberal hegemon. This question cannot be answered at this stage of my argument. What I do hope to establish, rather, is that what might be dismissed as ad hoc rationalizations conform to a general pattern. And this is conservatism’s appropriation of liberalism, the fact that the Right has become the Left in order to accuse the Left of becoming the Right. If conservative claims of cultural oppression adopt a “politics of culture” orientation, this is because they tacitly accept sociological and psychological assumptions that are traditionally at home on the Left.

It has often been noted that blacks confronting a culture of racial prejudice may respond by simply denying any trace of racial/cultural distinctiveness in the hopes of getting better treatment from whites. Hence, observes Alexander Alenikoff, the “compliment” that some whites pay to blacks: “I don’t think of you as black.”¹⁷⁶ Here is the proverbial “Oreo” or “Uncle Tom” black who attempts to symbolically efface his skin color by adopting stereotypically white mannerisms and viewpoints, in order to escape rather than confront racism, which he has simply absorbed into his identity.

But it has also been observed that against the Scylla of craven assimilation lies an opposite but equally self-defeating response to racial oppression, the Charbydis of trying to resist racism by internalizing positively valenced variants of traditional racist stereotypes. Richard Ford believes this has been the misguided strategy of some multiculturalists, who have sanitized traditional stereotypes of black laziness and fecklessness into a “Colored People’s Time” that eschews strict punctuality in favor of

¹⁷⁶ T. Alexander Aleinikoff, *A Case for Race Consciousness*, 91 Colum. L. Rev. 1060, 1081 (1991).

approximation. “Meetings that begin on C.P.T. Time usually begin about twenty minutes after the appointed time” explains critical race theorist Janice Haley-Benson.¹⁷⁷ An old stereotype is thus recast as enlightened liberation from the uptightness of the dominant white bourgeois culture and its obsession with efficiency and punctuality. Similarly, out-of-wedlock pregnancy has been celebrated as an expression of distinctively black cultural traditions, something that could be opposed only out of deep-seated racism and xenophobia. Defending this position, critical race theorist Regina Austin endorses an ethic that “declares wily, audacious, and good all conduct that offends the white, male, middle-class establishments.”¹⁷⁸

Ford argues that this kind of multiculturalism has made many African-Americans complicit in their own racial oppression. In declaring their independence from the dominant white culture and celebrating their imagined cultural roots, these multiculturalists have merely surrendered to historical prejudice, erecting their identities on a foundation of caricatures and stereotypes.¹⁷⁹ In calling upon blacks to offend the hegemonic norms of the white culture, Austin is also calling upon them to embrace the stereotypes—like sexual promiscuity—on whose basis offense can be given. And so what appears like resistance to prejudice is really capitulation to it.

While these kinds of problems might seem unique to African-Americans, close inspection reveals that conservatives confront a similar twin-horned dilemma. Writing in the preface to *Proud To Be Right*, Goldberg urges conservatives to guard against being seduced by “the narrative of victimization.” That narrative is correct on the merits—conservatives “are called racists, bigots, fools, fascist, etc. every day by those who control the commanding heights of the culture.” But Goldberg believes that too much complaining is counterproductive because it “concedes the authority of the liberal establishment to make such claims” and “encourages conservatives to internalize two unhealthy responses.” The first is “the burning desire to offend liberals just for kicks” which, though harmless in moderation, can often come off as obnoxious. The other, antipodal response is “self-hating conservatism,” which compels conservatives “to apologize for being ‘old-fashioned’” or “to prove they ‘care’ too.” Hence the “abomination” of “compassionate conservatism.”¹⁸⁰

These dangers closely mirror the dilemma faced by African-Americans. In declaring “wily, audacious, and good all conduct that offends the white, male, middle-class establishments,” blacks are tacitly acceding to traditional racist stereotypes, despite themselves conceding the legitimacy of that

¹⁷⁷ Ford, *Racial Culture*, pg. 49.

¹⁷⁸ Regina Austin, *Sapphire Bound!*, 1989 Wis. L. Rev. 539, 555 (1989).

¹⁷⁹ Ford, *Racial Culture*, at 78.

¹⁸⁰ Goldberg, *Introduction*, pg. xi.

establishment. And conservatives who act on their “burning desire to offend liberals just for kicks” fall into an analogous trap, because they thereby accede to the authority of the liberal establishment to enforce the stereotypes, like conservative incivility, on whose basis offense can be given. At the other extreme, just as blacks may obsequiously assimilate to the last details of stereotypical white comportment, artificially shedding every last trace of cultural distinctiveness in order to obtain the approval of their betters, so the “Uncle Tom conservative” is prepared to shed the better part of his conservatism in order to earn the grudging respect of the anointed. Afraid of being classed as benighted, he instead attains the dubious distinction of being acknowledged as a “reasonable conservative.” Just like African-Americans, conservatives must walk a fine line if they are to retain their dignity and self-respect. Both alike must struggle with the ever-present possibility that they have in one way or another internalized the dominant dispensation, and that what seems like resistance to it is actually surrender to it.

Whether a conservative responds to the slanders of “those who control the commanding heights of the culture” with self-hatred or with a “burning desire to offend liberals just for kicks,” the important point is that the culture wars transpire, not only between liberals and conservatives, but also *within* conservatives themselves, as a struggle between their authentic conservatism and the internalized liberalism that compromises it. Even facially unequivocal opposition to liberalism may be a symptom of this inner conflict inasmuch as it tacitly concedes the cultural authority of the liberal establishment. The liberalism against which conservatives struggle is not, as per the “culture of politics” perspective, a discrete, clearly identifiable set of political actors, but, as per the “politics of culture” perspective, the power “to objectify, to make identifiable and ‘objectively’ real the various and ever changing aspects of our experience.” Conservatives feel culturally oppressed because they feel it is liberals who hold most of this power.

The Left has long reminded us that a dominant white male European culture can deprive its victims of the very language through which to recognize and resist their oppression. Jerry Martin describes the “postmodern argument” as the view that “[l]anguage, ideas, and values... reflect the interests of groups and provide effective means by which dominant groups can control and shape the self-understanding of less powerful groups.”¹⁸¹ Conservative claimants of cultural oppression now make the post-modern argument too. Addressing the root causes of Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential defeat, conservative commentator Bill Whittle observes:

¹⁸¹ Jerry L. Martin, *The University as Agent of Social Transformation: The Postmodern Argument Considered*, in *THE IMPERILED ACADEMY* 203, 220, ed. Howard Dickman (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993).

The problem which we've had as conservatives and Republicans for the longest time, and I mean for ten, fifteen, twenty years now, certainly since Ronald Reagan, is that as conservatives we do not believe in our own philosophy. The fact is that the GOP leadership and all the national-level candidates, again with one or two exceptions, are victims of Stockholm syndrome. The pop culture has beaten them up so severely that they are utterly unwilling to stand for what they claim to believe in publicly. They're in a way ashamed of it.¹⁸²

Like the kidnapping victim who begins to identify with her own captor in order to cope psychologically, so conservatives have to various degrees internalized the values of their liberal overlords, inauthentically moderating their stances in deference to the dominant dispensation until they no longer remember what they believe in. Speaking satirically for liberals, Kahane discloses that "[v]ia our silken garotte of 'political correctness,' we have undermined and hamstrung your very ability to think with clarity, to judge with confidence—and to see us for what we really are."¹⁸³ The Left has "essentially deprived you of your own language"¹⁸⁴ and "robbed you of your tongue, of your fighting spirit."¹⁸⁵ The problem is not simply that political correctness has deprived conservatives of their right to *express* their beliefs—through media bias or campus speech codes—but that it has moreover and more insidiously obstructed their ability to even *form* beliefs, to translate their true feelings into clear statements of position which they can then defend without embarrassment.

Hence Frank's observation that conservatives now portray themselves as "without agency," as "hapless victims adrift in a fatalistic universe where only liberals may act."¹⁸⁶ In this vein, Savage accuses liberals of making ordinary Americans feel "like a bunch of wet-behind-the-ears neophytes." Having been "drugged into submission,"¹⁸⁷ these Americans must now "shake free of their brainwashing."¹⁸⁸ Taking this logic a step further, Kahane charges that when a conservative looks in the mirror, he sees only "a coward, a weakling, a quivering mass of protoplasm, a spineless jellyfish, a neutered creature stripped of dignity and cowering in fear."¹⁸⁹ Not content to simply present their side of the argument, liberals have moreover de-centered conservatives' very sense of themselves, compromising their basic agency powers.

With conservatives thus enervated, liberals can then incentivize them to turn on their own and give liberals the dangerous satisfaction of hearing their own judgments repeated on the Right. Liberals, writes Coulter, are prepared to bestow a "Strange New Respect" on conservatives "who so crave liberal

¹⁸² <http://www.davidhorowitztv.com/2012/11/16/bill-whittle/>

¹⁸³ Kahane, *Rules for Radical Conservatives*, pg. xiv.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 113.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 201.

¹⁸⁶ Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, pg. 126.

¹⁸⁷ Savage, *Enemy Within*, pg. 216.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 196.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. xiii.

approval” that “they will gratuitously attack fellow conservatives.” This is “the slutty girl’s path to popularity” and the one taken by John McCain in 2000 when he upbraided conservative evangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as “agents of intolerance” who “shame our faith, our party, and our country.”¹⁹⁰ Liberals will only be encouraged, and never appeased, by conservative apologies.¹⁹¹ But conservatives “who turn on the Republican Party from the left can expect instant stardom.” The “establishment media give the monkey a banana for throwing feces at a Republican and there’s always a monkey who wants the banana.”¹⁹²

Republican-appointed Judge John E. Jones III, who ruled that teaching intelligent design in public schools is unconstitutional in the famous *Dover* case, was given a banana when he was fawningly hailed by the liberal media as “a man of integrity and intellect,” as “moderate, thoughtful and universally well-regarded,” and a “renaissance man.” The truth, writes Coulter, was that he spent the better part of his career on the state liquor board. Nevertheless, he was willing to give liberals what they wanted, and the rewards soon followed. The *New York Times* “still won’t mention that John Ashcroft went to Yale [George W. Bush’s highly conservative, evangelical attorney general],” notes Coulter, “but it managed to work in that Judge Jones’s *father* graduated from Yale.”¹⁹³ Those occupying “the commanding heights of the culture” wield the carrot as well as the stick. And in both cases, the instrument of coercion is effective only because the conservative has been secretly cowed by the cultural prestige of liberalism, internalizing his enemy as a part of himself, becoming addicted to liberalism as to a drug whose ephemeral satisfactions come at the cost of his own integrity.

Frank writes that many conservatives have found the “ready-made identity” offered up by anti-liberal backlash “so compelling that they have internalized it, made it their own, shaped themselves according to its attractive and uniquely American understanding of authenticity and victimhood.”¹⁹⁴ But conservative claimants of cultural oppression insist that it is liberalism that offers the ready-made identity and see their emergence into conservatism as the casting off of this false consciousness in favor of autonomous self-determination. Thus, Katz eventually came to recognize that he had been shaped by a “Northeastern culture” where he “learned liberalism as a pose,” a “social script that the properly educated were compelled to follow.”¹⁹⁵ And Joel Pollack explains that he “did not take the final step of becoming a

¹⁹⁰ Ann Coulter, *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob Is Endangering America* (New York: Crown Forum, 2011), pg. 289.

¹⁹¹ Ann Coulter, *Guilty: Liberal “Victims” and Their Assault on America* (New York: Three Rivers, 2009), pg. 177.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, pg. 115.

¹⁹³ Ann Coulter, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), pg. 251-52.

¹⁹⁴ Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, pg. 158.

¹⁹⁵ Katz, *A Nonconforming Reconstruction*, pg. 73.

Republican for quite some time,” hampered as he was by his “Democrat past and by the stigma that haunts any party that champions the right of individuals to succeed.” His conversion meant that he would now be accused of the sins of greed, racism, and sexism, but it was also what allowed him to overcome “the nagging, debilitating sense of guilt that accompanies Left-wing politics in general.”¹⁹⁶

The conservative who achieve this authenticity carries the cross of all the usual liberal slanders, but he is at least at peace with his own conscience. By contrast, the liberal avoids social conflict by internalizing it. Sacrificing authenticity for outward peace, he becomes the slave of an overbearing liberal superego, a “nagging, debilitating sense of guilt.” As we saw earlier, Anderson’s “new post-liberal counterculture” offers “a liberating release” for students beaten down by politically correct orthodoxy. And this is because conservative claims of cultural oppression have as their objective, not to intellectually proselytize to conservatism, but *to erode our repressive inhibitions against the conservatism that is already there*. They seek, not to defend conservative ideas, but to liberate individuals for those ideas by exploding the veneer of naturalness and inevitability in which liberalism ensconces itself. With conservatism being the ordinary American’s authentic default setting, liberalism’s political successes are also its successes in compromising that authenticity, whose resuscitation is the *sine qua non* a new conservative awakening.

Liberals will predictably dismiss all this as histrionic posturing. But they are receptive to similar claims when they come from their own favored groups. Feminists have long held that patriarchy is so insidious as to have colonized women’s very subjectivities, depriving them of the very agency powers they require recognize and resist patriarchy. They too have been accused of histrionic posturing and hallucinating oppression. But this judgment has a ready explanation in the very theory being advanced. Feminist Robin West writes that “[a]n injury uniquely sustained by a disempowered group will lack a name, a history, and in general a linguistic reality.”¹⁹⁷ Catherine MacKinnon believes that “[w]omen have been substantially deprived not only of their own experience but of terms of their own in which to view it.”¹⁹⁸ It is just this kind of linguistic deprivation that now appears to afflict some conservatives, as Kahane and Savage are willing to acknowledge. In the one case, it is women who have internalized patriarchy, shaping themselves in accordance with its dictates. In the other, it is conservatives who have internalized

¹⁹⁶ Joel B. Pollack, *A Frank Exchange: The Tale of My Political Conversion*, in *PROUD TO BE RIGHT: VOICES OF THE NEXT CONSERVATIVE GENERATION*. Ed. Jonah Goldberg (New York: Harper, 2010) pgs. 152-53.

¹⁹⁷ Robin L. West, *The Difference in Women’s Hedonic Lives: A Phenomenological Critique of Feminist Legal Theory*, 15 *Wis. Women’s L.J.* 149 (2000).

¹⁹⁸ MacKinnon, Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Sexuality*, in *Campus Wars* 71, 72, eds. John Arthur and Amy Shapiro (1995).

the vision of the anointed, accepting the image of themselves as benighted. If radical feminists characterize women as “pervasively constructed by male aggression,”¹⁹⁹ so perhaps conservatives have been pervasively constructed by liberal aggression. The liberal elites control, not only the institutions, but, even more crucially, the background norms in terms of which even conservatives must see themselves. This is why conservative claims of cultural oppression signify an inward spiritual struggle as much as an outward political one.

To be sure, many conservatives will reject Kahane’s and Savage’s formulations as hyperbolic. But the hyperbole is, in its *substance*, fully consistent with the musings of conservatism’s more dispassionate theoreticians. A spineless jellyfish or quivering mass of protoplasm is precisely what could be expected to become of a conservative who, despite himself and against his deepest instincts, came to view liberalism, not as a perspective on reality, but as reality itself, as Kimball says. He would then have to see his opposition to liberalism as a perversion rather than a challenge, as Kimball also says. And this judgment would predictably yield the kind of self-division described, hyperbolically and histrionically, by Savage, Kahane and others. Kimball believes that “we are all liberals now,” if not by conviction then by “contagion,” and Kahane and Savage do no more than spell out the predictable psychological consequences of that contagion.

The nature of the contagion is conveyed more temperately by Gelernter when he bemoans that “[t]oday, when Americans praise their own nation, they do it defiantly; that unselfconscious patriotic pleasure is gone.”²⁰⁰ The offense isn’t just liberals’ disdain for America, but that this disdain has filtered into the “habits, tastes, and feeling” of the ordinary American, whose patriotism can no longer be wholehearted. He now expresses that patriotism, not in its original purity, but in defiance of his own internalized liberalism. Liberals believe that what conservatives condemn as “assaults” on their values are metaphorical figures of speech designating what are just *disagreements* with those values. But these grievances should be taken more literally, as references to the liberalism that liberals have succeeded in instilling in conservatives themselves. The assault is not just against conservative ideas but against conservatives’ very being. If liberals cannot acknowledge their conservaphobia, it is because they cannot acknowledge *this*.

In all these regards, conservative claims of cultural oppression are the mirror image of the Frankfurt School Marxists’ attempts to explain the failure of socialist revolution by the insidious effects of cultural manipulation—yet another respect in which the Left is the Right and the Right is the Left. If

¹⁹⁹ Abrams, *Sex Wars Redux*, pg. 304.

²⁰⁰ Gelernter, *America Lite*, pg. 8.

conservative claims of cultural oppression implicitly reject the methodological individualism that sustains culture wars skepticism notwithstanding their own professions of individualism, this is because that approach threatens to obscure the operation of oppressive social forces that structure the self-conceptions which methodological individualism accepts as brute data admitting of no further analysis. And if they are prepared to impute false consciousness notwithstanding that the concept has traditionally been opposed by conservatives as a tool of leftist tyranny, this is because they have, no less than the anointed, arrogated to themselves a privileged epistemic vantage point from which the self-conceptions of millions may be explained away as epiphenomena of forces they cannot perceive—the indoctrination of academia, media, and Hollywood, which have colonized the very souls of Americans. Here as elsewhere, a framework of analysis that originated in the Left’s critique of the wider society has become incorporated in the Right’s critique of the Left.

8. Intellectualized Anti-Intellectualism

As an ostensible species of right-wing populism, conservative claims of cultural oppression will strike most liberals as the same old rank anti-intellectualism. Frank writes that anti-intellectualism “is one of the grand unifying themes of the backlash, the mutant strain of class war that underpins so many of Kansas’s otherwise random-seeming grievances.”²⁰¹ And indeed, the traditional tropes of American anti-intellectualism can to varying degrees be discovered in conservative claims of cultural oppression. Richard Hofstadter observed that “[i]n the course of generations, those who have suffered from the operations of intellect, or who have feared or resented it, have developed a kind of counter-mythology about what it is and the role it plays in society.”²⁰² This counter-mythology portrays intellectuals as “pretentious, conceited, effeminate, and snobbish; and very likely immoral, dangerous, and subversive.”²⁰³ Pitting intellect against warmth of feeling, solidity of character, practical wisdom, and democracy itself, this counter-narrative reduces intellect to “mere cleverness, which transmutes easily into the sly or the diabolical.”²⁰⁴

These themes are present in conservative claims of cultural oppression. Gelernter writes that “[i]ntellectuals are rebels without causes” for whom “disaffection” and “alienation” come with the job.²⁰⁵ Intellectuals are thus understood to embody a primordial hostility to the existing order for which their

²⁰¹ Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, pg. 191.

²⁰² Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, pg. 45.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, pg. 18-19:

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 45.

²⁰⁵ Gelernter, *America Lite*, pg. 11.

avowed principles are cheap post-hoc rationalizations. Why their hostility? Ingraham proposes that many elites “are unhappy nerds who never got over being bullied by football players in high school.”²⁰⁶ Intellect is not the organ of truth but the perverse weapon through which those lower in the order of nature reverse that order and exact revenge on their betters. Hence Hannity’s warning that liberals “have turned the full force of their rhetorical firepower against anyone—particularly conservatives—who oppose them.”²⁰⁷ Where conservatives seek the good, liberals cultivate “rhetorical firepower,” a hollow verbal dexterity that aims, not to persuade, but to bewilder, intimidate, and humiliate, to impose rules under which conservatives are destined to lose. Kahane believes that progressives have “wormed” their “cant and jargon” into ordinary discourse, forcing ordinary Americans to accept “rules designed for the artificial and stylized combat of the courtroom” as “applicable to daily life.”²⁰⁸ Relying on empty verbal acrobatics, liberals have bewildered the superior intuitive wisdom of the ordinary American, which though effective in the real world, is ill-suited to the artificial rules through which liberals maintain their dominion.

These tropes are all recurring themes of conservative claims of cultural oppression. Even where they are not articulated directly, they lurk not far underneath the surface at the level of intimation and insinuation. Nevertheless, the positioning of the conservative claimant of cultural oppression as the perspicacious outsider speaking truth to power has altered the meaning of conservative anti-intellectualism, engendering an attitude that cannot be neatly classified as either pro-intellectual or anti-intellectual and rather fuses the two in a novel way.

Fundamentalism, the alleged epicenter of right-wing anti-intellectualism, is a case in point. The “one-hundred per cent mentality,” writes Hofstadter, was a religious style that, reacting to late nineteenth-century Darwinism, academic Biblical criticism, and rationalism, was “shaped by a desire to strike back against everything modern—the higher criticism, evolutionism, the social gospel, rational criticism of any kind.”²⁰⁹ This was a type of mind “totally committed to the full range of the dominant popular fatuities.” Tolerating “no ambiguities, no equivocations, no reservations, and no criticism,” this kind of person “considers his kind of committedness as evidence of toughness and masculinity.”²¹⁰ The one-hundred per centers were unabashedly dismissive of education and the life of mind. William Jennings Bryan condemned “mind worship” as “the great sin in the intellectual world today.”²¹¹ And Billy Sunday

²⁰⁶ Ingraham, *Shut Up and Sing*, pg. xvi

²⁰⁷ Sean Hannity, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty over Liberalism* (New York HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), pg. 97.

²⁰⁸

²⁰⁹ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, pg. 121.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 118.

²¹¹ *Ibid.* pg. 127.

warned “Thousands of college graduates are going as fast as they can straight to hell. If I had a million dollars I’d give \$999,999 to the church and \$1 to education. When the word of God says one thing and scholarship says another, scholarship can go to hell.”²¹²

By contrast, today’s fundamentalists are not in the least dismissive of learning and intellect. On the contrary, they insist this is a stereotype exploited by secularists to discredit them and further entrench secularist hegemony. Just like fire and rock music, scholarship is a morally neutral instrument that can be used for good or ill. Billy Sunday would give only a dollar to education. But his contemporary descendants endow their own institutions of higher learning, like Patrick Henry College, where activities like debate and moot court prepare students to defend their cause against the world. Fundamentalist youth who do not matriculate at religious colleges may attend Christian worldview training seminars to prepare them for the challenges that await them at secular colleges. There, they are trained to engage the secular or left-wing professors and students whom they shall soon confront, learning how to detect hidden assumptions, demand evidence, identify contradictions, and thereby expose liberals’ bogus claims to neutrality and objectivity. The fundamentalists of yesteryear were taught to turn their backs on the siren song of sinful intellectuals. But today’s fundamentalists are eager to confront these sinful intellectuals head-on with their own counter-arguments, counter-knowledge, and counter-experts.

The evolution of the evolution controversy is illustrative. William Jennings Bryan famously declared at the Scopes Monkey Trial that he was “more interested in the Rock of Ages than in the ages of rocks.”²¹³ But contemporary fundamentalists are very interested in the ages of rocks. Ann Coulter observes that the Kansas State Board of Education could not find any evolution proponents to come make their case in school curriculum hearings. The “evolution fanatics justified their disappearing act on the grounds that members of the school board did not have open minds.”²¹⁴ No doubt, these “evolution fanatics” agreed with Susan Jacoby that the “cloaking of anti-rational premises in the language of either philosophy or science has proved useful to both Protestant and Catholic anti-rationalists and is one of the hallmarks of the new old-time religion.”²¹⁵ But the “new-old time religion” believes that its critics are the real anti-intellectual sectarians. Fundamentalists are berated for their lack of epistemic humility and aversion to rational deliberation. Yet they find no interlocutors when they go out of their way to embrace precisely these virtues, and only find their sincerity impugned. Like blacks who continue to be thought of as shiftless and stupid no matter what they do or achieve, fundamentalists continue to be treated as one-

²¹²Ibid. pg. 122.

²¹³ Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason*, pg. 21.

²¹⁴Coulter, *Godless*, pg. 249.

²¹⁵ Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason*, pg. 200.

hundred-per-centers even as their conduct is manifestly that of a fifty-one per center. And so they cannot but conclude that it is they who now hold the balance of intellectual virtue and that it is secularists who are now guilty of the dogmatism and parochialism that has been pinned on them ever since the Scopes Monkey Trial. If most of the people with initials after their names disagree, this is only because liberals have established monopolistic control of biology departments, just as they have of humanities departments, in a self-fulfilling prophesy generating the social conditions under which they can dismiss their opponents as without intellectual credibility.

Not all conservative claimants of cultural oppression are fundamentalists or even religious, of course, and the case of fundamentalism is surely unique in many ways. But the difference between the fundamentalism of yesteryear and the “new-old time religion” illustrates in microcosm that whatever anti-intellectualism may be discerned in conservative claims of cultural oppression is a more sophisticated, multi-layered creature than the archetypal variants classically documented by Hofstadter. The conservative claimant of cultural oppression is hostile, not to intellectualism *per se*, but to the bogus version thereof propagated by the Left. Intellectualism is not as such corrupting or reducible to idle cleverness. For there *is* a genuine article, but it is the conservatives who possess it and the liberals who only *feign* it—albeit with great skill. Indeed, liberals have been *trained* to feign it as part of their larger effort to discredit conservatives. Conceding the fact that better educated people tend to be more liberal, Harris observes that this “education gap” admits of two opposing interpretations. The first, favored by liberals, is “that better educated people will obviously have the right answers on the issues of the day, because they are smarter and see things more clearly.” But the truth, writes Harris, is that this ostensible “education gap” is actually an “indoctrination gap.” The “wide consensus among the better educated on different questions is not proof that they have been taught to think for themselves, but irrefutable evidence that they have been programmed to think alike.”²¹⁶ Conservative claims of cultural oppression seek to expose the education gap as an indoctrination gap, and thereby dissolve the prestige that liberal intellectualism has undeservedly arrogated.

Liberal intellectualism is pernicious, not because it stands pitted against warmth of feeling, solidity of character, or practical wisdom—the classic anti-intellectual narrative—but because what pose as intellectual credentials are really *cultural* credentials. Codevilla writes:

Today’s Ruling Class, from Boston to San Diego, was formed by an educational system that exposed them to the same ideas and gave them remarkably uniform guidance, as well as tastes and habits.

²¹⁶ Harris, *The Next American Civil War*, pg. 63.

These amount to a social canon of judgments about good and evil, complete with secular sacred history, sins (against minorities and the environment), and saints.²¹⁷

If the indoctrination gap cannot be readily recognized as an indoctrination gap, this is because to adopt the “tastes and habits” of the “Ruling Class” is to be automatically credentialed as given to critical reflection and inquiry. Correlatively, to reject these tastes and habits is to be dismissed as a know-nothing one-hundred percenter. But this is a social illusion, a tool of liberal domination, the product, not of critical reflection, but of an automatic social reflex that liberalism has instilled in us.

Anderson writes that the casualness with which liberals dismiss conservative ideas betrays a “remarkable self-satisfaction.” John Rawls’s conception of the “reasonable,” which rules “out-of-bounds any arguments that deny a ‘mature adult woman’ the right to a first-trimester abortion” and the *Romer* Court’s summary conclusion that “objections to homosexual practices were a form of ‘animus’” reflect the same “unshakable self-complacency” that defined the thinking of liberal Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, whose famous theory of moral development “culminated, comically, with....Harvard liberalism.” Such coincidences are reminders that “people don’t always (or perhaps even usually) come to the views they hold by reason, study, and reflection.”²¹⁸ If conservatives feel no need to actually engage the technical arguments by which a Kohlberg or a Rawls reach their conclusions, this is as they see it the mark, not of any visceral anti-intellectualism, but of an anthropological sophistication that allows them to recognize the education gap as an indoctrination gap. Having discerned the recurring values that emerge again and again in ostensibly discrete intellectual realms, conservatives are persuaded that these are all just varied expressions of the same all-encompassing ideological impulses. Being epiphenomena of these impulses, the technical arguments are not to be accepted at face value, but rather exposed as epiphenomena, mere tools of the liberal encroachment that conservatives see everywhere. Far from “suffering from the operations of the intellect” as something foreign and menacing, today’s conservative claimant of cultural oppression has “seen it all before.”

Alvin Gouldner observes that higher education is the means by which the “New Class is at first readied for contest against the old class.” Colleges and universities are “the finishing schools of the New Class’s resistance to the old class.”²¹⁹ Taking this proposition quite literally, conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe that the elite universities from which the liberal elites hail are more akin to finishing schools or social fraternities than to Platonic academies. Admission to elite colleges is commonly

²¹⁷ Codevilla, *The Ruling Class*, pg. 9.

²¹⁸ Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, pgs. 27-28.

²¹⁹ Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), pg. 44.

seen as a mark of intellectual merit. But more important, writes Codevilla, is the candidate's contribution to a "social profile that fits the school's image of itself," a commitment to "fit in," to be "in with the right people," and give "the required signs that one is on the right side, and joining in despising the Outs."²²⁰ Academic merit is thus a social construction of the ruling liberal elites, an institutional filter designed to weed out conservatives and set the stage for widespread liberal domination. First instilled in the university, the "tastes and habits" of the elites are later enforced with the threat of social ostracism. It is, writes Anderson, simply assumed in Rawls's Cambridge or Manhattan's Upper West Side or the CBS newsroom that one has "the correct liberal opinions," and those who challenge the prevailing orthodoxy will cease to receive invitations to dinner parties.²²¹ In withholding these invitations, liberals are just doing what they were first trained to do in the college classroom, where the ostracism of conservatives was first taught to them as "progressive" behavior.

The elite university *believes* that it has replaced an old WASP-regime of social virtue revolving around gentility and "character" with a new regime of intellectual virtue revolving around raw mental firepower. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression accuse that *the new intellectual virtues are social virtues in disguise*, just as automatic and unreflective as those of the WASP *ancien regime*. It is these institutions, laments Gelernter, that produced Obama, the "symbol of the new American elite, the new establishment, where left-liberal politics is no longer a conviction, no longer a way of thinking: it is built-in mind-furniture you take for granted without needing to think." Consequently, the nation is "filling inexorably with Airheads, nominally educated yet ignorant; trained and groomed like prize puppies to be good liberals."²²² To defend one's liberalism as a mere conviction is to refuse the role of the liberal prize puppy, to refuse liberalism as a *social identity*. But perversely, it is liberalism *qua* social identity, *qua* automatic social reflex, that has been culturally credentialed as the embodiment of a privileged intellectual acuity. Just as the classic finishing schools strove to make a certain kind of physical posture automatic, so the elite universities now inculcate a certain mental and spiritual posture through which to announce oneself as, and be acknowledged as, curious, broad-minded, given to scientific detachment and dispassionate analysis, etc—in short, as a member of the anointed in good standing. With this posture having become tied to both liberalism and students' self-esteem, it becomes difficult to distinguish the social signaling from the underlying virtues it is intended to advertise. And this is how an indoctrination gap now masquerades as an education gap.

²²⁰ Codevilla, *The Ruling Class*, pgs. 12-15.

²²¹ Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, pg. 28.

²²² Gelernter, *America Lite*, pgs. 109-110.

F. Carolyn Graglia notes that “[f]eminism’s war against the housewife has pitted the best educated, most sophisticated, most aggressive, and most masculinized portion of the female population against women who generally possess less education and less worldly experience.”²²³ But this acknowledgment is not any kind of concession to feminism. Whereas liberals will conclude that feminists’ education and worldly sophistication is probative of feminism’s truth, conservative claimants of cultural oppression deny that an aristocracy of brains is any more “natural” than an aristocracy of inherited titles and estates. On the contrary, it is just another arbitrary social hierarchy that that naturalizes the interests and sensibilities of the dominant class, the purpose of a “liberal education.” Defending the Republican Party’s poorly-spoken 2008 Vice-Presidential nominee, Camille Paglia argues:

One of the most idiotic allegations batting around out there among urban media insiders is that [Sarah] Palin is "dumb." Are they kidding? What level of stupidity is now par for the course in those musty circles? (The value of Ivy League degrees, like sub-prime mortgages, has certainly been plummeting. As a Yale Ph.D., I have a perfect right to my scorn.) People who can't see how smart Palin is are trapped in their own narrow parochialism -- the tedious, hackneyed forms of their upper-middle-class syntax and vocabulary.²²⁴

If Palin had to be caricatured as a cretin, this was because her own species of brand of intelligence posed a threat to what the liberal elites had been trained to recognize as the social markers of intellectual distinction. She had to be dismissed as stupid because anything else would raise troubling question about whether “tedious, hackneyed forms of their upper-middle-class syntax and vocabulary” such as are inculcated at Yale Ph.D. programs actually correspond to the intellectual prowess with which the liberal culture associates them. The liberal elites believe they are motivated by reason rather than identity. But their need to uphold a specific identity is betrayed in their very conception of what qualifies as reason.

Coulter condemns Palin’s treatment at the hands of television commentator Charlie Gibson, who famously stumped her with a seemingly straightforward question about whether she agreed with the “Bush Doctrine.” One might think that a serious vice-presidential candidate would have to be familiar with this. But the truth, writes Coulter, is that even foreign policy experts were confused by the reference, a neologism concocted by Gibson that had never really been in circulation. Gibson opted for a “deliberately arcane way to ask a simple question in order to make himself look brilliant.” The interview therefore “had little to do with Palin.” Gibson was just an ex-morning show host pursuing his own agenda in order to win acceptance from his betters.²²⁵ The liberal elites’ putative intellectualism is a social performance functioning, not to enlighten, but to preserve and augment their store of cultural capital

²²³ Graglia, *Domestic Tranquility*, pg. 96.

²²⁴ http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/camille_paglia/2008/10/08/palin.

²²⁵ Coulter, *Demonic*, pgs. 256-57.

through a *posture* of critical thinking and truth-seeking. Conservatives are merely the foils through opposition to whom these qualities can be affirmed and advertised. The invention of an intellectually gratuitous argot intended to reduce Palin to a deer staring into the headlights revealed that posture as a posture, a social performance calculated to enforce the social hierarchy between liberal insiders and the “despised Outs.”

Liberals may possess a more sophisticated syntax and vocabulary. But it is the conservative claimant of cultural oppression who possesses the *anthropological* sophistication to recognize the *social* meaning of that syntax and vocabulary. Like Mike Gallagher, the claimants study liberals the way a primatologist studies apes, discerning semi-instinctual reflex actions where liberals see reflective judgment, collective patterns and pressures where liberals see individual initiative, and, most generally, causes where liberals see reasons. How can such scientific detachment be criticized as anti-intellectual, the conservative will ask. To the extent conservative claimants of cultural oppression play loose with the facts, this is not because of anti-intellectualism, but because *truth is too pedestrian a concern for the critical theory of the Right*. As we saw in the previous chapter, the latter is concerned, *not* with the “the truth of or about [a] discourse,” but with “analyzing existing discourses of power to understand how subjects are fabricated or positioned by them, what powers they secure (and disguise or veil), what assumptions they naturalize, what privileges they fix, what norms they mobilize, and what or whom these norms exclude.” That is exactly what Coulter was doing in her defense of a seemingly hapless Sarah Palin.

To be sure, there have always been conservative intellectuals who, far from rejecting the life of mind as such, simply insisted that liberals have been blindly socialized into their liberalism. But this disposition has become *fused* with what was formerly anti-intellectual right-wing populism in order to *intellectualize* populist antipathy to intellect. This has permitted less educated “populists” to rail against intellectuals without feeling themselves anti-intellectual while concomitantly endearing that populism to conservative intellectuals, who might otherwise have felt compelled to dismiss it as a perversion of true conservatism. Instead, they can join the populists in condemning liberal intellectualism as self-serving and fraudulent.

This logic is often misunderstood by liberals. Jacoby charges that, in pinning the “intellectual elite” label on liberals, conservative intellectuals attempt to conceal their own privileged class status.²²⁶ They are just as prosperous and politically connected as their liberal counterparts. But they exempt themselves from the label solely on the basis of their affiliation with the Republican Party.²²⁷ However, the

²²⁶ Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason*, pg. 287.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, pgs. xviii-xix.

contradiction is dissolved within the worldview of conservative claims of cultural oppression. Marxists recognize that someone with bourgeois origins can, having recognized the injustice of the bourgeois order, choose to ally himself with the proletariat and enter whatever advantages his bourgeois background conferred upon him into its service. Such a person is a member of the bourgeoisie as measured by education, wealth, habits, social knowledge, and so forth. But he is a member of the proletariat as a matter of political allegiance. And similarly, a conservative intellectual qualifies as an intellectual inasmuch as he employs the tools of the intellect. But he is a non-intellectual inasmuch as he wields these tools *against* the class interests of the intellectuals, in the service of the ordinary American. The conservative intellectual is a class-traitor who leads the fight to expose the education gap as an indoctrination gap and thus overthrow the unfair advantages that intellectualism confers on liberals.

Thomas Sowell remarked that the greatest advantage of a Harvard degree is that one will no longer be intimidated by people with Harvard degrees. And the ordinary conservative achieves this immunity vicariously through the conservative intellectual. Having “been through the system,” the conservative intellectual is a whistleblower who exposes the machinations of liberals from the inside, obviating the need for a Harvard degree. Goldberg writes that liberals “place their faith in priestly experts who know better, who plan, exhort, badger, and scold,”²²⁸ idealizing Kennedy’s “action-intellectuals” who “yearned to be supermen, a Gnostic priesthood imbued with a special knowledge of how to fix society’s problems.”²²⁹ The conservative intellectual disavows all such ambitions, however. He wields his intellectual advantages, not to badger and scold the American people, but to expose the badgering and the scolding for what they are. The claimants’ intellectualism is a counter-intellectualism purged of its elitist distortions, one informed by the superior insight of which only outsiders are capable. Conservative claimants of cultural oppression are not anti-intellectuals but “meta-intellectuals” who expose the illusions and delusions of intellectuals in just the same way that the intellectuals purport to expose those of everyone else.

9. Concluding Reflections and Adumbrations: A “Higher Truth”?

Susan Jacoby writes that “[i]t is much easier to understand the resurgent religious fundamentalism of the 1920s than it is to understand the politicization of anti-rationalism over the past twenty-five years.” Both embody fear of modernism, hatred of secularism, and anti-intellectualism. But

²²⁸Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 14.

²²⁹ Ibid., pg. 213.

whereas the reactionary fundamentalism of the early Twentieth Century can be readily attributed to nostalgia for a simpler, less confusing time, no such factors explain the resurgence of these impulses today. “What Edenic past,” Jacoby wonders, “is calling out today to those who rail against experts, scientists, and intellectual ‘elites’?”²³⁰ It is possible to understand why an American in 1800 would “have sought the answer to life’s problems in a passionate ‘born again’ relationship with God.” But this becomes more mysterious some two-hundred years later, given the vastly greater “disjunction that exists today between fundamentalist faith and the sum of human knowledge.”²³¹

Not all conservatives are fundamentalist, or evangelical, or even religious. But many liberals feel similar perplexed by the existence of conservatism in general. Why exactly does the United States not enjoy the progressive consensus that Western European nations appear to have achieved in many spheres? Historians can offer explanations aplenty—America’s Puritan heritage, the frontier experience, the absence of a feudal past, and so forth—the careful examination of which lies beyond the scope of this inquiry and my own competence. And yet one can still ask, with Jacoby, why the forces generated by these distinctive experiences have not been more thoroughly submerged by the general momentum of modernism and secularism, which seem more thoroughly entrenched in Europe. The past cannot provide the entire explanation, because we must also understand what *in the present* permits the past to be continually reborn and revitalized.

That other half of the explanation, I am proposing, can be discovered in the political psychology we have come to know as conservative claims of cultural oppression. Though emanating from out of a convergence of traditional right-wing impulses, these claims also have a life of their own, because they fuse those impulses with the very forces that might have otherwise submerged them. It is this new identity and social practice that breathes fresh life and resonance into what liberals dismiss as strange atavisms. For these atavisms have become bound up with a multifaceted adversarial posture whose satisfactions imbue them with a compellingness they would otherwise lack.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression are much more than a victim narrative. For they chronicle the heroism of the uphill battle, the struggle of the lowly underdog who perseveres against all the odds, in his dignity if in nothing else. Moreover, the victimization in question is of a highly rarefied, Kafkaesque variety. The claimants understand themselves as speaking truth to a power that conceals itself at every turn, to forces that will never officially announce their goals, their motivations, or even their existence. This does not typically devolve into crude conspiracism of the kind often imputed to the

²³⁰ Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason*, pg. 29.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 186-87.

extreme right. There is the visceral conviction that things are not as they seem, to be sure. But whereas this once meant things like the John Birch Society's allegation that President Eisenhower was a self-conscious agent of communism, the conservative claimant of cultural oppression judges the problem to be largely structural and unconscious or semiconscious and not the calculated product of human agency. There is indeed a liberal conspiracy, but it consists in hidden layers of meaning rather than secret plots. It transpires, not in smoke-filled backrooms, but in the *fabric of our culture*, as *Chronicles* says.

Richard Hofstadter observed in his *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* that the political paranoid—which in his time meant the right-wing, populist rabble-rouser—does not recognize his enemy as “caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, himself a victim of his past, his desires, his limitations,” and instead exalts him as a “free, active, demonic agent” who “manufactures the mechanism of history and, indeed, deflects the normal course of history.”²³² This pathos is present in conservative claims of cultural oppression to various degrees. But these claims are foremost distinguished by the imperative to expose the social and historical accretions that blind liberals to the nature of their own motivations, to the status of their culture *as a culture*, the product of a history that liberals do not themselves understand. Liberals are thus opaque to themselves, the victims of their past and limitations. As Goldberg observes, they lie not only to others but also to themselves, and this makes them something different from the free, active, demonic agents that haunted the old-time right-wing populist.

Liberals' tendency to deceive themselves makes them elusive adversaries. And this very elusiveness provides conservatives with a missionary zeal befitting a minority of the aroused and awoken in a Brave New World of well-socialized automatons blinded to their own pieties. Conservatives are not only outsiders, but also outsiders whose true insight has been slandered as unhinged paranoia by the powers that be, individuals condemned to a world in which the truly enlightened are slandered as the most benighted. This posture provides a unifying vocabulary to individuals from across a broad diversity of backgrounds, educations, religious beliefs, and political priorities, providing them with a shared enemy that bonds them together. Transcending all their differences is a shared commitment to resistance against transgressions and usurpations that are as all-pervasive as they are invisible to the naked eye. The imperative to give the Left a “taste of its own medicine” and, if possible, “beat it at its own game,” is not mere political expediency, whatever political expediency it has. It also serves an existential, quasi-religious function, channeling an age-old aspiration to pierce the veil of illusion and reveal a truth higher than can be acknowledged by the established social order.

²³² Richard Hostadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), pg. 32.

If the forces of anti-modernism should have, as Jacoby contends, persevered right into twenty-first century America, this is because they have incorporated into themselves what Alisdair MacIntyre remarks is “one of the most characteristically modern of activities,” the *unmasking* of the “unacknowledged motives of arbitrary will and desire which sustain the moral masks of modernity.”²³³ It is this imperative, and not traditionalist reverence for the wisdom of the ages, that drives conservative claims of cultural oppression onward. The claimants are united, not by self-interest, or self-pity, or fear, or hate, or even by “a burning desire to offend liberals just for kicks,” but by an existential passion and yearning to *unmask*, to pull down the veil of illusion behind which the transgressions and usurpations of liberalism lie concealed, so that the Great Wizard of Oz might finally be exposed in his all-too-human nakedness.

* * *

But *what* exactly do these claims purport to unmask? A fuller answer to this question will have to await later chapters, but we can already adumbrate its nature. Certainly, I have not argued that the parallels running between conservative claims of cultural oppression and left critique prove their moral equivalence, whatever the moral force of left critique may be. The issue thus far hasn’t been plausibility but *intelligibility*. And my argument is that much is lost on this front if one begins with the premise that conservative claims of cultural oppression are free-standing, ad hoc political contrivances that occasionally appropriate various leftist tropes for rhetorical effect. On the contrary, they draw their resonances from certain broad currents of Western civilization which well antedate the comparatively recent machinations of contemporary culture warriors.

One of these, we saw, is the dichotomy between *Kultur* and *Civilization*, and so conservatives’ sense that they are being oppressed by liberal *Civilization*, by an ethos that is culturally thicker than the moral abstractions in terms of which liberals explain their creed. Uday Metha writes that notwithstanding liberalism’s official universalism and inclusionary ideals, it has often conditioned political inclusion on the achievement of a “properly socialized rationality” without which individuals are judged too “ignorant” or “inscrutable” or “uncivilized” to merit political rights. Though a general capacity for rationality is ascribed to all human beings, behind these ascriptions lies a “thicker set of social credentials that constitute the real bases of political inclusion.”²³⁴ What Frank and other liberals would dismiss as mere rantings and ravings point us to precisely this problem, because ignorant, inscrutable, and uncivilized is precisely how

²³³ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press 1984), pg. 72.

²³⁴ Uday S. Metha, *Liberal Strategies of Exclusion*, 18 Pol. & Soc’y 427 (1990).

liberals are disposed to characterize conservatives. If liberals do not see conservatives as quite their equals, this is because conservatives lack a “properly socialized rationality” that would credential them as such in the eyes of liberals. This is why conservatives can feel culturally oppressed.

Of course, conservatives have not been deprived of their basic political rights as were the “uncivilized” colonial subjects of old European powers. However, Stephen Macedo observes that liberalism properly understood involves, not only a “foreground” of the familiar liberties and constitutional protections,²³⁵ but also a “hidden curriculum,” a “background statecraft that educates indirectly by shaping social norms and redefining contours of the moral environment.”²³⁶ Liberalism is necessarily *transformative*. Since the qualities of the liberal personality not givens of human nature, liberalism can maintain the foreground of the political rights and liberties only by transforming many of our basic habits and commitments, and to this end must subtly enforce a host of informal norms and expectations through a variety of institutional mechanisms and practices.²³⁷

This places conservative claims of cultural oppression in a new light. What conservatives decry as the undemocratic hegemony of the elites across government and civil society refers to precisely this background, to liberalism’s “hidden curriculum.” And what conservatives in their various ways maintain is the disingenuousness of liberalism refers to the tension between foreground and background. Conservative claims of cultural oppression may be reflections of the fact that this background statecraft can be effective only *as the background*, that its normative contents cannot be fully articulated and acknowledged and must operate through what are, *from a certain perspective*, various double-standards and unacknowledged social stigmas—a “censorship of fashion.” If the claimants are “anti-intellectual,” this is because they sense intuitively that liberal intellectualism both perpetuates and conceals this “background statecraft”—a web of informal coercions aimed at molding *people*. And if the claimants are “paranoid,” this is because the subtlety of these machinations makes it exceedingly difficult for them to tie their visceral sense of things to any specific, clearly identifiable referents. In short, they have predictably failed to articulate something that is intrinsically resistant to rational exposition, just as I suggested in Chapter One.

Coulter laments that Republican George Allen lost his 2006 Virginia Senate race after referring to a “tracker” that his Democratic opponent had sent to follow his campaign events as “Macaca.” The media quickly concluded that this was an ethnic slur. The tracker, S.R. Sidarth, was Indian, and it was all downhill

²³⁵ Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pgs. 8-9.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 6.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*,pg. 137.

for Allen from there. But Sidarth, answers Coulter, was actually a “little Nazi block-watcher[]... intruding on peoples’ enjoyment of public events with intimidating video surveillance.” Sidarth averred that he was the only “person of color” present. But he was also the “only person in the audience doing opposition research for the rival candidate” as well as the son of a wealthy banker, probably the richest person in the audience. He was also a student at “the prestigious University of Virginia” at the same time that the audience which he had come to “humiliate” came from a Virginia town on the Kentucky border where the median household income was \$23,431. Coulter concludes that “[t]oday’s privileged elites go to distant rural towns to ridicule ordinary Americans and then run back to the *Washington Post* to whimper that they have been mortally offended.”²³⁸

Sidharth saw himself as gathering political intelligence, not intimidating attendees with his very presence. But if the smiling benevolence of upper-middle-class liberals indeed disguises a “venomous hatred,” as Lasch believes, then perhaps his mere presence sufficed to humiliate the “half-savage relics of past time,” who are not so privileged as to share his “hygienic conception of life.” Siddhart did not convey his contempt verbally. But it may have been broadcast through Bourdieu’s “imperceptible queues of bodily *hexis*”—to which conservatives are attuned as liberals are not. Many feminists have argued that men are typically oblivious to the power-advantage that a patriarchal culture bestows upon them irrespective of their conscious designs. And in similar fashion, Siddhart may have been inured to the effect of his presence on those lacking the liberal privilege of which he unselfconsciously availed himself. Perhaps his intent was not to serve as a “little Nazi block-watcher”—as a subject gazing at objects, as it were—but his insensitivity to the broader power-relations within which his conduct transpired cannot redound to his moral credit. Senator Allen’s prejudice may have been more overt, but not necessarily more egregious than Siddhart’s. And it at least had the virtue of being open and honest, Coulter may have been thinking.

The point is not Coulter makes this argument successfully, or even that it could be made successfully. Rather, it is that much which liberals dismiss as the hallucinatory stupidity of conservative claims of cultural oppression is more charitably interpreted as an implicit rejection of the facile rationalism that liberals themselves reject where women and minorities are concerned. Here, liberals can recognize that the present is always permeated by a long, complicated history, and that subtle interplays of inherited social meanings shape the broader context of human action. This is the intuition that animates Coulter’s critique. The Macaca incident had a racial dimension, clearly. But prejudice can operate along multiple

²³⁸ Coulter, *Guilty*, pg. 165.

vectors, and this dimension may have been intertwined with the normalizing social hierarchy described by Lasch, a hierarchy between the “civilized” liberal and the half-savage relic of past times, between the anointed and the benighted. Here as elsewhere, *the instruments of left-critique can, once suitably reinterpreted, fill in the logical lacunae by which conservative claims of cultural oppression would otherwise be vitiated.*

An anthropologist would feel compelled to investigate whatever layers of hidden meaning might endow the otherwise nonsensical behaviors of an indigenous tribe with a new intelligibility. To the extent they aspire to a scientific understanding of the world, liberals must follow suit in a good faith effort to suspect their first impressions of conservatives’ cultural grievances, rather than indulging in the kind of bemused incredulity that Coulter’s arguments naturally elicit. The evidence for a liberal bigotry is concededly impressionistic and anecdotal. But it could scarcely be otherwise, given the nature of the bigotry being alleged. If the average white may be suspected of harboring a subtle, largely unconscious racism that may be betrayed only in the subtle minutiae of his comportment, then should it not be expected that the subtlety—and hence the plausible deniability—will be all the greater among the liberal elites, whose “education gap” affords them a verbal dexterity lacked by the ordinary American?

The question at this stage is not whether conservative claims of cultural oppression are rational or irrational, but whether whatever irrationality may be imputed to them possesses a deeper *structure* than has been recognized, and therefore admits of a level of exegesis that is preempted by the usual refrains about “anti-intellectualism” or “authoritarianism” or “anger” or “paranoia.” If so, then we must articulate that structure before we can fairly judge these claims. The usual labels are not necessarily “false,” but they are mere *placeholders* designating phenomena for which we lack an adequate vocabulary. This is precisely what must be developed. Conservative claims of cultural oppression may not present themselves in a form that lends itself to rarefied academic discussion. But they do present us with a concrete human immediacy that is all too often filtered out of such discussions. They do not at first blush seem to warrant being taken “seriously.” But close inspection reveals questions that must be acknowledged as serious.

Though I have made every effort to approach these claims charitably, that they are regularly suffused with all manner of elision and dishonesty cannot be denied. Contra Ingraham, the most obvious reason why liberals preferred de Villepin to George W. Bush is that the former opposed the Iraq war while the latter initiated it, a fact by comparison with which any jingoistic praise showered on Napoleon is insignificant. And if the elites would, as per Ingraham’s hypothetical, be more disturbed by simulated

rapes performed by American soldiers than by simulated rapes performed by rap superstars, one obvious explanation is that the former represent their country while the latter represent only themselves.

But while the logical distinctions forwarded by liberals are reasonable, the question posed by conservative claims of cultural oppression is whether those reasonable distinctions are being used to promote a broader set of social meanings which the official logic of liberal argument does not capture, whether this logic forms part of an undeclared effort to transform sensibilities in a more “civilized” direction. Conservative claims of cultural oppression may give short shrift to important logical distinctions while also tracking subtle interplays of social meaning from which those distinctions would otherwise distract us. If the claimants are at a rhetorical disadvantage—vulnerable to the “full force” of liberals’ “rhetorical firepower” as Hannity says—this is because their arguments are premised on a holistic, largely ineffable sense of the cultural landscape that is inherently less articulate than liberal argument. Ingraham’s suggestion that the elites’ attitudes towards Middle America mirror those of European explorers towards the “dark continent” of Africa seems far-fetched. But that absurdity may just reflect the difficulty of articulating the subtleties of liberalism’s transformative background, a “hidden curriculum” seeking to instill conservatives with a “properly socialized rationality.”

This would explain what liberals see as conservatives’ overheated rhetoric and intellectual dishonesty. For the dishonesty is, I am suggesting, the *price* of intimating what cannot easily be put into words. Michael Bérubé writes that the right-wing assault on higher education “is not entirely relativistic; it is not simply a matter of grabbing any argumentative handle that happens to be lying nearby.” For “these activists believe—insofar as their own words can be believed—that they are acting in the service of a higher truth.” Their facts may be wrong, but they “fib for truth.”²³⁹ And our question is whether there exists some “higher truth” in the context of which the intellectual dishonesty *makes sense* as the necessarily distorted articulation of that higher truth, a truth whose nuances and complexities may be lost on conservatives themselves.

A transformative liberalism may mean that “public reason” cannot, at least to the extent the transformation is still underway, ever make itself fully public. There might then arise a certain class of individuals who *understandably* given their position as not fully “liberalized”—whatever this turns out to mean—*must* perceive liberalism as disingenuously illiberal, who are *condemned* to the paranoia and anti-intellectualism that liberals impute to them. In this respect at least, conservatives would qualify as genuine victims. I will flesh out these intuitions in later chapters. At the moment, they remain mere

²³⁹ Michael Bérubé, *What’s Liberal About the Liberal Arts?: Classroom Politics and “Bias” in Higher Education* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), pg. 46.

intuitions. But they are the intuitions that naturally follow from a charitable, anthropologically sophisticated stance toward conservative claims of cultural oppression, as well as from any liberalism that remains properly reflexive about whether its own highest principles have been properly understood and applied.

Chapter Three

Convoluting Stories, Right Eclecticism

Many liberals will dismiss the ideas surveyed in the previous chapter with sighs of impatience. And these sighs express a very basic liberal intuition, here conveyed by Nunberg:

[T]he Democratic Left has always been susceptible to a particular kind of stereotyping by its opponents. People don't usually require a convoluted story to explain the political views of bourgeois conservatives or proletarian radicals. But it takes more ingenuity to discredit the motives of people who don't seem to be motivated by obvious self-interest. So conservatives have always tried to dismiss those concerns as the signs of baser motivations like social pretension, dilettantism, or effete sentimentality."¹

But if the Democratic Left has always been susceptible to this kind of stereotyping, conservatives have always and correlatively been susceptible to the counter-charge that these stereotypes rest on "convoluted stories," stories that, being suspiciously elaborate, must be disingenuous and nefariously motivated. The conservative understands even before opening his mouth that his own policy preferences will be suspected as empty rationalizations for some form or another of arbitrary self-interest—either tangible economic self-interest, as in a preference for lower upper-income taxation and reduced social welfare spending, or the intangible, symbolic variety, as in the perpetuation of patriarchy or heterosexual privilege. His defense of laissez-faire will be analogized to the rapaciousness of nineteenth century robber barons, just as his opposition to the "normalization" of homosexuality will be likened to racist hostility to the civil rights of African-Americans. Plead though he may that his positions are truly principled, the conservative is condemned to play defense against the more plainspoken egalitarianism of liberals, by comparison with which his own views must indeed appear convoluted, and therefore disingenuous.

Conservatives know that liberals issue these judgments. Hence Ben Shapiro's sense that there is always a "patina of character assassination" lying underneath liberals' criticisms of conservatives, who liberals perennially refuse to accept at face value. Hence also Peter Schweizer's observation that hypocrisy "has proven to be a wonderful weapon for liberals in their war against conservatives."² Liberals may commit their own fair share of hypocrisy. But they can dismiss their hypocrisy as isolated transgressions

¹ Geoffrey Nunberg, *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left Wing Freak Show* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), pg. 63.

² Peter Schweizer, *Do As I Say (Not As I Do): Profiles in Liberal Hypocrisy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), pgs. 4-5.

without broader social significance, while holding out the hypocrisy of conservatives as an essential feature of conservatism itself. Whereas liberals are only guilty of their own personal failings, conservatives are additionally guilty of *conservatism*, a guilt for which their hypocrisy is merely additional evidence. For this hypocrisy is understood to be the predictable outcome of conservatives' refusal to acknowledge the egoistic or hateful nature of their underlying motivations, which is what the hypocrisy ends up betraying in the end.

But conservatives insist that the common sense which liberals appear to have on their side is just a social construction of liberalism, merely the interpretive lens which the victors have imposed on the vanquished. "For over two hundred years, the Left has had an effective but unearned monopoly on the rhetoric of virtue," laments Roger Kimball.³ And conservatives believe that this monopoly has allowed liberals to project all of their vices onto them—either attributing to conservatives vices that are uniquely liberal or else burdening them with exclusive responsibility for what are regrettable human constants. Projection, writes Coulter, is "liberals' number-one human trait."⁴ If earlier dispensations succeeded in projecting their vices and other frailties onto blacks, Jews, women, Gypsies, and assorted infidels, then the new regime of liberalism has merely seized upon conservatism and conservatives as the new target.

Conservatives also believe that liberals' "science," "reason," and "progress" are merely ideological stratagems through which to legitimate this targeting. Reviewing and synthesizing the results of a wide body of academic research into the psychological foundations of conservatism, psychologist John Jost and his colleagues concluded that conservatism is significantly correlated with an interrelated set of epistemic, existential, and ideological motives originating in aversion to change and equality:

Although we maintain distinctions among specific hypotheses for the purposes of assessing cumulative empirical evidence for and against each, one of the virtues of our motivated social-cognitive perspective is that it helps to integrate seemingly unrelated motives and tendencies. Specifically, we argue that a number of different epistemic motives (dogmatism-intolerance of ambiguity; [refusal of] cognitive complexity; closed-mindedness; uncertainty avoidance; needs for order, structure, and closure), existential motives (self-esteem, terror management, fear, threat, anger, and pessimism), and ideological motives (self-interest, group dominance, and system justification) are all related to the expression of political conservatism....

Theoretical and empirical considerations lead us to conclude that virtually all of the above motives originate in psychological attempts to manage uncertainty and fear. These, in turn, are inherently related to the two core aspects of conservative thought mentioned earlier—resistance to change and the endorsement of inequality.⁵

³ Roger Kimball, *The Long March: How the Culture Revolution of the 1960s Changed America* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), pg. 23.

⁴ Ann Coulter, *Guilty: Liberal "Victims" and Their Assault on America* (New York: Three Rivers, 2009), pg. 136.

⁵ Jost, John T.; Glaser, Jack; Kruglanski, Arie W.; Sulloway, Frank J, *Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition*, Psychological Bulletin, Vol 129(3), May 2003, 339-375, pg. 351

But as conservatives see it, all this is merely the pseudo-scientific veneer for a campaign of cultural propaganda aiming to transfers onto conservatives what are in truth the epistemic, existential, and ideological characteristics of liberals. Liberalism reinforces a set of social understandings that arrogates to liberals the virtues of intellect, civilization, tolerance, transparency, awareness, and cosmopolitanism while socially defining conservatives in terms of their absence. Under a hard-nosed, scientistic façade, liberals indulge their identitarian impulses with impunity, as Jost's basic conclusions have become the conventional wisdom of "educated people," who can now disguise their conservaphobia as "theoretical and empirical considerations." The Jost study and others like it are merely high-tech scapegoating rituals supervised by the high priests of liberalism, the liberal elites, who are charged with keeping conservatism taboo and keeping conservatives on the defensive. Representing a refusal to acquiesce in this state of affairs, conservative claims of cultural oppression seek to introduce ambiguity into the neat divisions that liberals would draw between victim and victimizer and between the virtuous and the vicious.

Frank characterizes the "Great Backlash" of the culture wars as "a curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs with the world."⁶ And this impression is confirmed by some conservatives. Codevilla's writes that the "Country Class" of ordinary Americans "speaks with many voices" and "defines itself practically in terms of reflexive reactions against the rulers' defining ideas and proclivities."⁷ Nevertheless, we shall now see how this seemingly anarchic diversity is underpinned by a unifying temperament and logic whose object is to tear down the veil of illusion that liberalism has institutionalized all about us. What Frank dismisses as a "curious amassing" is better understood as a right-wing analogue of what Roger Kimball, borrowing from Fredric Crews, calls the "Left Eclecticism" which has come to dominate the humanities. Left Eclecticism encompasses a "wide variety of anti-establishment modes of thought." But at its foundations, it is

An understanding, ultimately borrowed from the Marxist ethos, that analytic and theoretical discourse is to be judged primarily by the radicalism of its stance. The schools of thought thus favored make sharply divergent claims, yet all of them set themselves against allegedly repressive Western institutions and practices. In dealing with a given painting, novel, or piece of architecture, especially one dating from the capitalist era, they do not aim primarily to show the work's character or governing idea. The goal is rather to subdue the work through aggressive demystification—for example, by positing its socioeconomic determinants and ideological

⁶ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2005), pg. 123.

⁷ Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Ruling Class: How They Corrupted America and What We Can Do About It* (Beauford Books 2010), pg. 52.

implications, scanning it for any encouraging signs of subversion, and then judging the result against an ideal of total freedom.⁸

Like Left Eclecticism, the Right Eclecticism of conservative claims of cultural oppression is characterized by sharp internal disagreements as to both substance and rhetorical strategy. But also like Left Eclecticism, it is marked by a certain unity of purpose. And this is to “subdue” liberalism through “aggressive demystification.” Right Eclecticism seeks, not to *refute* liberalism as a set of ideas, but to *expose* liberalism’s basic self-understanding as bankrupt, to reveal that the various existential, epistemic, and ideological motivations that Jost and other liberals would assign to conservatives are the hidden rot lying at the core of liberal virtue. It is liberals, not conservatives, who need order, closure, and structure. It is liberals, not conservatives, who pursue group dominance and endorse inequality. If conservatives are to discredit conservaphobia, they must discredit those from whom the conservaphobia issues, the liberal elites, which is what the critical theory of the Right ultimately seeks to do.

In all their permutations, the final upshot of conservative claims of cultural oppression is always that liberals, secular liberals, leftist, secularists, humanists—whatever they be called—are secretly guilty of the very moral and intellectual vices for which they excoriate religious traditionalists and other conservatives. If the “Country Class” defines itself “practically in terms of reflexive reactions against the rulers’ defining ideas and proclivities,” this is because the upshot of these ideas and proclivities is in each case to reinforce what is an inequitable division of moral, intellectual, and cultural capital between liberals and conservatives. Whatever their subject matter and whatever their tone, conservative claims of cultural oppression constitute a Nietzschean enterprise, an attempted *revaluation of values* endeavoring to expose the vices in what the left designates as its virtues and thereby to elevate the comparative virtue of conservatives. Underneath Frank’s “curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs about the world” lies the ever-present aim of reversing the roles of perpetrator and victim, of proving, as Coulter says, that liberals “are not offended, they are offending. They are not wounded victims, they are marauding oppressors. They are not innocents. They are guilty.”⁹

Conservative claims of cultural oppression seek to impugn, not only the motives of liberals, but also the very *meaning* of liberalism. The point is not simply that liberals are basely motivated, but that the ideals of liberalism embody a concealed repressiveness that we have been trained to overlook. The stigmas with which conservatives are now saddled are simply the punishment that awaits anyone who

⁸ Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), pg. 44.

⁹ Coulter, *Guilty*, pg. 32.

refuses that training. And it is in order to overthrow this training that conservatives seek to subdue liberalism, to reveal liberal virtue as just the visible tip of an invisible iceberg of liberal vice. I will, in this chapter, undertake six “case studies” of this basic project, six convoluted stories each of which seeks in its own way to upend what liberals have been privileged to define as common sense. With this achieved, I shall in the following chapter proceed with the hermeneutic task of systematizing the conservative project into a general theory that separates the wheat from the chaff, in order to reveal the higher truth that informs but also transcends the specific claims through which it is intimidated.

1. The Liberal as Crypto-Fascist

The project of subduing liberalism assumes many shapes and invites near-endless creativity. But it is perhaps at its clearest and most self-conscious in Jonah Goldberg’s *Liberal Fascism*, which as noted earlier was written in response to the author’s personal experience with the “sublimely confident” slanders of liberals. Richard Hofstadter describes the “moral atmosphere of Progressivism” as one of “warm philanthropy and breathless idealism in which the needs of the less gifted and underprivileged commanded a generous response.”¹⁰ This is the conventional wisdom, and also the way progressivism’s contemporary heirs, the liberal elites, prefer to view themselves. But this is precisely what Goldberg seeks to overthrow in arguing that this progressivism was an important source of intellectual inspiration for European fascism.¹¹ While liberals are accustomed to accusations of closet socialism, the comparison with fascism seems outlandish given the conventional understanding of fascism as a phenomenon of the extreme Right and of modern liberalism as one of the moderate Left. But Goldberg argues that this commonplace conceptualization is mistaken and that fascism has always been a phenomenon of the Left.¹² If we believe otherwise, this is only because the fascism label has been “projected onto the right by a complex sleight of hand”¹³ by liberals eager to slough their own sins off onto conservatives.¹⁴ The political spectrum itself, which we have all been taught as Poli Sci 101, is merely an artifact of the liberal culture, cultural propaganda serving to elicit animus against conservatives before a single word of formal condemnation has even been uttered.

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), pg. 340.

¹¹ Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pg. 8.

¹² Ibid. pg. 7.

¹³ Ibid. pg. 8.

¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 9.

Goldberg believes that all the criteria used to associate fascism with the Right are invalid. The Nazis' virulent anti-Semitism might seem to place them squarely on the right side of the political spectrum. But anti-Semitism no more distinguishes the Right from the Left than it does fascists from non-fascists. Karl Marx was a committed Jew-hater¹⁵ and Hitler's Italian ally Mussolini dismissed anti-Semitism as a silly distraction.¹⁶ We have moreover been trained to forget that the Nazis professed to be and campaigned as socialists. If we now feel certain that the Soviets were the only genuine socialists and that the Nazis merely bandied the label, this is because we have internalized the Soviet perspective on the matter.¹⁷ Stalin never recognized the Nazis as socialists. But this only reflected an interfamilial rivalry between different schools of socialism each of which had a natural interest in discrediting the other, to which end they obscured the deep affinities between them—such as contempt for tradition, for proceduralism, and a love of centralized planning.¹⁸ Hitler did despise communism. But this had nothing to do with anything that places communism on the left side of the political spectrum—hostility to capitalism or the bourgeoisie—and rather reflected his paranoid conviction that it was an essentially foreign and Jewish conspiracy.¹⁹ The Nazis were hardly indifferent to characteristic leftist concerns like ameliorating poverty or assuring basic economic rights. And this belies the idea that fascism is merely a more extreme version of conservatism the way socialism is a more extreme version of the welfare state.

The ideological core of fascism is not anti-Semitism, racism, or even hatred of communism, but “a cult of action, unity, and contempt for the ‘system.’”²⁰ It is defined, not by rabid nationalism as such, but by a set of emotional or instinctual impulses that fuel an uncompromising quest for community, the “urge to ‘get beyond’ politics, a faith in the perfectibility of man and the authority of experts, and an obsession with the aesthetics of youth.”²¹ Fascism calls upon man “to lay aside the anachronisms of natural law, traditional religion, constitutional liberty, capitalism, and the like and rise to the responsibility of remaking the world in his own image.”²² To this end, it sanctions an all-powerful state led by “an enlightened avant-garde who would serve as the authentic, organic voice of the ‘general will.’”²³

Thus understood, fascism displays striking affinities with Progressivism and its legacy in contemporary liberalism, which just like fascism promulgates a “sweeping vision of social justice and

¹⁵ Ibid. pg. 75.

¹⁶ Ibid. pg. 327.

¹⁷ Ibid. pg. 70.

¹⁸ Ibid. pg. 287.

¹⁹ Ibid. pgs. 74-5.

²⁰ Jonah Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas* (Sentinel 2012), pg. 224.

²¹ Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 14.

²² Ibid., pg. 31.

²³ Ibid., pg. 12.

community and the need for the state to realize that vision.”²⁴ Just like the fascism of old, the progressivism of today “sees no realm of human life that is beyond political significance.”²⁵ Goldberg believes this is acknowledged by Michael Learner, an intellectual guru of Hilary Clinton, who “insists that his new politics of meaning must saturate every nook and cranny of our lives by smashing the compartmentalism of American life.” We must, Lerner believes, “have our metaphysics confirmed in every human interaction and encounter.”²⁶ It is this totalizing imperative that separates Left from the Right and makes fascism a more extreme, violent, and undemocratic form, not of conservatism, but of liberalism, whose do-goodery obscures the underlying nature of its impulses.

Close inspection of the historical record reveals that what liberals believe *distinguishes* liberalism from fascism—and therefore from the conservatives they assume are incipiently fascist—actually reveals liberalism’s *affinities* with fascism. One might associate vegetarianism and animal rights with a benign egalitarianism that selflessly extends the circle of moral concern to non-human animals, things that seem as far removed from fascism as it gets. But these concerns, argues Goldberg, “were merely different facets of the obsession with organic order that pervaded the German fascist mind, then, and the liberal fascist mind today.”²⁷ This totalizing spirit is the reason why public health and the environment have loomed large for fascists and liberals alike. We do not ordinarily associate Nazism with nature preserves, sustainable forestry, and the fight against air pollution. But the Nazis “were among the first to take up these concerns,”²⁸ just as their “antismoking and public health drives foreshadowed today’s crusades against junk foods, trans fats, and the like.”²⁹ These affinities are not coincidences, but windows through which we may peer at liberalism’s subterranean imperiousness, which is simply better disguised than that of avowed fascists.

The Left imagines that its defense of social freedom stands in stark contrast to the benighted moral authoritarianism of conservatives, which fascism then takes to its logical extreme. But fascism was foremost defined by its *hostility* to traditional morality and the traditional family, which it hoped to replace with the authority of the state, and so was very much anathema to conservatism. As the champions of “traditional family values,” conservatives are painted as “crypto-fascists, incapable of thinking maturely about sex.” But it is in fact liberals who now follow the Nazis in seeking “to invade the family, to breach

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 327.

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 14.

²⁶ Ibid., pg. 332.

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 389.

²⁸ Ibid., pg. (377) 384.

²⁹ Ibid., pg. 19.

its walls and shatter its autonomy.”³⁰ This is presented to the public as “supporting education.” But the liberal obsession with education is the historical legacy of a fascistic progressivism, for which “capturing children in schools was part of the larger effort to break the backbone of the nuclear family, the institution most resistant to political indoctrination.”³¹ The Left’s attacks on traditional morality proceeds under the banner of enlightenment, but they are in truth “little better than a reprise of fascist arguments.”³²

For every fascist evil, Goldberg identifies a liberal analogue thereof which, though more benign in its implementation and repercussions, runs parallel to it in its underlying impulses. Liberals pride themselves on their conciliatory multilateralism. But they are in constant search of what William James dubbed “the moral equivalent of war,”³³ some social problem through opposition to which they can generate the same sense of collective meaning that the classic fascists achieved through militarism and conquest. Hence liberals’ nostalgic yearning for “the unifying experiences of the labor and civil rights movement,”³⁴ which they attempt to recreate in their contemporary group-think and do-goodery. Where the Gestapo had reeducation camps, today’s Left has counseling and sensitivity training.³⁵ Unlike classical fascists, liberals present their policies of social control as the benign liberation of human potential. But this just means that “[t]he quintessential liberal fascist isn’t an SS storm trooper” but rather “a female grade-school teacher with an education degree from Brown or Swarthmore.”³⁶ The latter may seem less menacing than the former. But the underlying impulses are similar, the absorption of the individual into a new all-encompassing community that promises liberation from all the constraints of tradition and human nature. This ambition is why liberal fascism must just like its more violent European counterparts designate scapegoats to symbolically embody all that resists its vision. And this scapegoat is the white male. The white male, writes Goldberg, is “the Jew of liberal fascism.”³⁷ The white male will not be led to the extermination camps, of course. But attacking him provides liberals with the same kinds of emotional satisfactions that anti-Semitism provided Nazis. Just like the Jew, the white male is excoriated as the unique source of an unparalleled evil, the bearer of illegitimate privileges, someone whose all-pervasive social, political, and cultural influence must be exposed and curtailed in the name of the public good—precisely the mission adopted by liberals.

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 376.

³¹ Ibid., pg. 326.

³² Ibid., pg. 176.

³³ Ibid., pg. 6.

³⁴ Ibid., pg. 329.

³⁵ Ibid., pg. 283.

³⁶ Ibid., pg.

³⁷ Ibid., pg. 368.

Liberal Fascism was poorly received by scholars of fascism, and one does not have to be a scholar of fascism to suspect that Goldberg has sought to establish a spurious affinity between fascism and liberalism by disingenuously abstracting some of their features away from their all-important historical contexts and philosophical rationales, treating these as mere side-notes. After all, it will always be possible to subsume much that does not truly belong together under vague and impressionistic abstractions like a “sweeping vision of social justice and community” or a “cult of action.”

But *Liberal Fascism* is at its core a conservative claim of cultural oppression. And so its ultimate object is less to establish the moral equivalence of liberalism and fascism as historical phenomena than to “level the playing field” between liberals and conservatives as contemporary political actors. To this end, Goldberg seeks to overthrow what he judges to be a one-sided liberal-centric reading of American history according to which “there are only two perpetrators of official misdeeds: conservatives and ‘America’ writ large.” Given that only conservatives can be bigots or tyrants, we will “virtually never hear that the Palmer raids, Prohibition, or American eugenics were thoroughly progressive phenomena.” These are sins for which America itself must atone.³⁸ The truth, however, is that “the liberal closet has its own skeletons.”³⁹ Enjoying the benefit of hindsight, today’s liberals speak of fascism as an unmitigated evil. But their forbearers in progressivism often spoke approvingly of the fascist movements that were germinating across the Atlantic.⁴⁰ And this was because they had a good deal in common with them. Blind to this history, liberals are also blind to their own tendencies, which they have projected onto conservatives. Liberals “keep saying ‘it can’t happen here’ with a clever wink or an ironic smile to insinuate that the right is constantly plotting fascist schemes,” when the truth is that “it did happen here” in the form of early 20th century progressivism.⁴¹ This is what the liberal narrative conceals, to the benefit of liberals and at the expense of conservatives. America writ large can be made to assume responsibility for the moral lapses of liberals because liberals have succeeded in convincing us that fascism is a phenomenon of the political Right, so that nothing resembling fascism could possibly be attributed to contemporary liberalism or its historical progenitors. Conservatives are thought to differ from the Nazis only as a matter of degree at best and to be incipiently fascistic at worst, whereas the continuities and parallels between fascism and liberalism are systematically obscured, so that liberalism may be identified with all that is good, true, and beautiful.

³⁸ Ibid. pg. 118.

³⁹ Ibid., pg. 22.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pg. 30.

⁴¹ Ibid., pg. 120.

Though accusatory in its title, *Liberal Fascism* is intended less as an indictment than a call for moral humility from liberals, an attempt to reverse the historical amnesia that blinds them to the nature of their own political impulses. The ultimate aim is not to quantify contemporary liberalism's affinities with fascism as sufficient to qualify liberals as "really" fascists, but to suggest that, however these be quantified, it is conservatives, not liberals, who lie at the furthest remove from fascism, and that it is the received wisdom to the contrary that facilitates the lopsided distribution of moral and political capital from which conservatives suffer. Liberals are surely nicer people than Gestapo agents. But this is owing, not to the intrinsic impulses of progressivism, but to the traditional American values by which progressivism is presently constrained. Goldberg argues that such factors as America's "geographical size, ethnic diversity, Jeffersonian individualism, a strong liberal tradition, and so on," have combined to render American fascism "milder, more friendly, more 'maternal' than its foreign counterparts."⁴² "Milder" and "more maternal" may vastly understate the differences between modern liberalism and fascism from a historical point of view. But Goldberg's project is ultimately psychoanalytical rather than historical. It is an investigation of the basic, constituent human impulses which may assume varied ideological shapes in reflection of surrounding circumstances—which have luckily served to sublimate and civilize the drives of progressivism in the American context. The purpose is not simply to indict liberals but to *subdue* liberalism, by isolating its essential core from the wider cultural currents in which that core has thus far remained camouflaged. While liberals will hold themselves out as pragmatists and fact-finders, laying underneath this self-image is a certain sensibility, a psychological need for order, for progress, for consensus, for expertise. And these needs are the seeds from which fascism would germinate if not held in check by America's essentially conservative heritage.

This is why conservatives refuse to take liberal idealism at face value. As Charles Taylor observes, "modern humanism is full of potential for...disconcerting reversals: from dedication to others to self-indulgent, feel-good responses, from a lofty sense of human dignity to control powered by contempt and hatred, from absolute freedom to absolute despotism, from a flaming desire to help the oppressed to an incandescent hatred for all those who stand in the way."⁴³ And the conservative claimant of cultural oppression senses that the seeds of the latter are always germinating somewhere in the depths of the former. Today's liberals may repudiate heavy-handed political repression of other progressive offshoots. But they have not repudiated what are the *seeds* of that repression, their sweeping vision of social reform and social unity implemented by the centralized authority of experts. And that is why the fascist threat,

⁴² Ibid., pg. 8.

⁴³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), pg. 699.

whatever it may be, will come from the Left rather than the Right. If this goes unrecognized by the received wisdom, this is because that wisdom is itself a component of that threat.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel observes that however inclined we may be to condemn Nazi war criminals as uniquely evil, none of us can know what would have become of us under similar conditions. For none can know how their basic psychological predispositions would have interacted with such a radically changed environment:

Ordinary citizens of Nazi Germany had an opportunity to behave heroically by opposing the regime. They also had an opportunity to behave badly, and most of them are culpable for having failed this test. But it is a test to which the citizens of other countries were not subjected, with the result that even if they, or some of them, would have behaved as badly as Germans in like circumstances, they simply did not and therefore are not similarly culpable. Here again one is morally at the mercy of fate, and it may seem irrational upon reflection, but our ordinary moral attitudes would be unrecognizable without it. We judge people for what they actually do or fail to do, not just for what they would have done if circumstances had been different.⁴⁴

Goldberg is, in a sense, calling upon us to rise above our “ordinary moral attitudes” and adopt a higher rationality. And this rationality reveals that it would be contemporary liberals rather than conservatives who would find themselves most drawn to Nazi ideology under an altered set of circumstances, where liberals’ constituent impulses would be the more readily channeled into overt fascism. However alien this overt fascism may be to liberals’ present political dispositions, the basic sensibilities are akin, and it is only the constraints which the American context has imposed on these that explains why the outcomes are so different.

As I will explain in greater depth in later chapters, much that liberals would dismiss as conservative conspiracism expresses a certain Nietzschean naturalism whose logic is rarely articulated but can be identified in the subtext of conservative argument. What may seem like conservatives’ rejection of rationality is, in its deeper hermeneutic structure, a repudiation of the rationalism that underpins the liberal identity. Nietzsche writes:

This seems to me to be one of my most essential steps and advances: I have learned to distinguish the cause of acting from the cause of acting in a particular way, in a particular direction, with a particular goal. The first kind of cause is a quantum of dammed up energy that is waiting to be used up somehow, for something, while the second kind is, compared to this energy, something quite insignificant, for the most part a little accident in accordance with which the quantum “discharges” itself in one particular way—a match versus a ton of powder. Among these little accidents or “matches” I include so-called “purposes” as well as the even much more so-called “vocations”: They are relatively random, arbitrary, almost indifferent in relation to the tremendous quantum of energy that presses, as I have said, to be used up somehow.

⁴⁴ Thomas Nagel, *Moral Questions* (Cambridge University Press 1991), pg. 34.

.....Is the “goal,” the “purpose” not often enough a beautifying pretext, a self-deception of vanity after the event that does not want to acknowledge that the ship is *following* the current in which it has entered accidentally?⁴⁵

If liberals dismiss *Liberal Fascism* as outrageous, this is because they identify their liberalism with the particular “purposes” and “vocations” to which they are committed, which are rather different from those of bona fide fascists. But within the Nietzschean perspective tacitly adopted by Goldberg, these are mere “matches,” mere accidents of history, and so without the significance that liberals would assign them. For liberalism is ultimately “a quantum of dammed up energy that is waiting to be used up somehow, for something,” and this “something” is a function of political environment rather than inner principle.

Being rationalists at heart, liberals believe that their present motivations are dispositive. But these motivations are “relatively random, arbitrary” in the context of their overall organismic economy, which prescribes certain general psychological needs but then leaves the specific mechanism of their satisfaction to the accidents of the ambient culture. It is only owing to lucky circumstances that liberals’ basic impulses can find expression in the moral equivalent of war rather than war itself, in progressive education rather than midnight Gestapo raids, in the deconstruction of dead white male literary bias rather than anti-Semitic genocide. Alter the circumstances and the former could transmute into something more closely resembling the latter. This is the danger that liberals unbeknownst to themselves harbor. And *Liberal Fascism* is a wake-up call for liberals to engage in a kind of Augustinian self-examination, to look deep below the surface of ostensibly pure motives in order to discern the morally ambiguous, all-too-human substrate of those motives’ constituent impulses, to recognize that those impulses could manifest themselves very differently under a changed set of political and cultural conditions and, therefore, that whatever differences might exist between modern liberalism and the classic fascisms cannot redound to liberals’ moral credit.

Not only are liberals and their good intentions “morally at the mercy of fate,” as Nagel would say, those good intentions moreover threaten to alter that fate for the worse. For every liberal incursion against America’s traditional values must further erode the inhibitions which have thus far served to sublimate and civilize liberal fascism. This is precisely what liberals, with their culturally oppressive “clever winks and ironic smiles,” cannot see but which the conservative, standing outside of liberalism and its sublime self-confidence, perceives in its full horror. From there he beholds Manchurian candidates who, operating according to a program which they do not themselves understand, are by imperceptible increments creating the conditions for their own final activation. The clever winks and ironic smiles are

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books 1974), Sec. 360.

no less than anything else but steps in this process, and the purpose of Golberg's investigation is to place these winks and smiles in the historical context that would reveal their as yet unconscious, subterranean meaning. In this way does Goldberg subdue liberalism. Liberals like John Jost may deploy their "science" to impugn the basic agency powers of conservatives. But Goldberg aims to demonstrate that it is liberals who have forfeited these powers through their *submission to liberalism itself*, which operates through them in ways that elude their own cognition and control.

2. The Liberal as Crypto-Racist

Charges of fascism are usually received with a grain of salt in our political culture. But accusations of racism can be more serious, and conservatives' association with racism and hostility to civil rights has been a perennial thorn in their side. And so they have in their Right Eclecticism developed a set of "convoluted stories" the function of which is to subdue liberalism's claims to moral superiority on this front. The core of these stories is the assertion, as Nunberg puts it, that conservatives are "the true inheritors" of the civil rights tradition as embodied in Martin Luther King.⁴⁶ For it is conservatives' opposition to all forms of color consciousness that now upholds that legacy, which has been betrayed by liberals through their support for color-conscious policies like affirmative action and multiculturalism. This counter-narrative holds that conservatism and the quest for civil rights draw on the same moral sources, the traditional American values despised by liberals. O'Reilly thus reminds us that King was a "traditionalist" who believed that the civil rights movement stood for "the most sacred values of our Judeo-Christian heritage."⁴⁷ Hence the heavy presence of African-Americans in institutions like churches and the military, which embody these traditional American values. Ingraham notes that the military enjoys a level of racial diversity that cannot be found in liberal elite organizations like People for the American Way or New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁴⁸ Liberals may be the ones talking the loudest about the virtues of diversity, but it is conservatives who actually deliver on it.

Conservatives endeavor, not only to appropriate the legacy of the civil rights movement, but to recast its history in a way that highlights the role of Republicans in supporting desegregation and of Democrats in opposing it, in the hopes of thereby depriving the Democratic party of its pride of place as the political vanguard of racial equality. The Democratic Party now enjoys a reputation as the enlightened

⁴⁶ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 157

⁴⁷ Bill O'Reilly, *Culture Warrior* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), pg. 145.

⁴⁸ Laura Ingraham, *Shut Up & Sing: How Elites from Hollywood, Politics, and the UN Are Subverting America* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2003), pg. 149.

defenders of racial equality while Republicans are suspected as relicts of a racist past. But Cupp and Joshpe argue that this perception is the product of politically insignificant historical accidents, “the mistakes of a few high-profile Republicans” like Barry Goldwater, who personally supported desegregation but opposed federal civil rights legislation on constitutional grounds. Such accidents of history have been relentlessly exploited by liberals in order to create the “cult of the Republican Racist.” This is a “product of revisionist history and a political weapon of necessity” that serves to obscure the Democratic Party’s historical antipathy to racial equality from the Civil War onwards.⁴⁹

One might think that the nature of Goldwater’s motivations and the role of many Republicans in promoting civil rights legislation are by now irrelevant, given the political realignments that emerged from the 1960s. After all, the defection of Southern segregationist Democrats to the Republican party, the purging or demoralization of moderate and progressive Republicans, and the transformation of the GOP into an instrument of ideological conservatism would seem to render hopelessly anachronistic any attempt to determine the “historic positions” of the two parties as they now stand.⁵⁰ But it is precisely this conventional wisdom that conservative claimants of cultural oppression mean to challenge, because they understand themselves to be that conventional wisdom’s victims. If the traditional bastions of segregation gravitated toward the Republican Party, the real reason was not some “Southern Strategy” of covert, dog-whistle appeals to racism, but principled opposition to the cultural chaos of the 1960s, with which the Democrats had become associated. The liberal narrative refuses to recognize this. In doing so, it serves the twin ideological functions of 1) absolving liberalism of responsibility for the decay of traditional values and 2) portraying the ordinary American as still mired in unacknowledged racism, and so as requiring liberal interventions.

But this assessment is just another liberal projection as conservatives see it, because it is in fact liberals who remain unaware of *their* racism. The Democratic Party has not truly repudiated its former racist appeals, but merely disguised and sublimated them, rechanneling the racial animus that once motivated Jim Crow and lynching into liberal social policy, which is just a politically correct way of subordinating African-Americans. Black conservative Deroy Murdock writes that “[t]he Republican Party and conservatives generally have spent the last 147 years trying to liberate black Americans and make them self-reliant, while Democrats and liberals have spent most of that time either trying to hold blacks behind or making them dependent on big-government solutions.”⁵¹ There is therefore a natural

⁴⁹ S.E. Cupp and Brett Joshpe, *Why You’re Wrong About The Right: Behind The Myths—The Surprising Truth About Conservatives* (New York: Thresholds Editions, 2008), pgs. 6-7.

⁵⁰

⁵¹Qt. in *Ibid*, pg. 5.

continuity between the solidly Democratic South's support for slavery and Jim Crow and the contemporary Democratic Party's support for affirmative action and social welfare programs, just as there is a natural continuity between the Republican Party's historical role as the party of abolition and Reconstruction and its contemporary hostility to the welfare state.⁵² Liberals have successfully arrogated the mantle of civil rights and racial equality. But this is yet another liberal ruse, because these ideas are actually being used to once again enforce back dependency and black group-identity, first created by slavery. And so blacks who are unswervingly loyal to the Democratic Party remain stuck on the "Democratic plantation," refusing the "underground railroad" offered by the Republican commitment to the free market.

In line with his general theory of liberalism, Goldberg traces the racial consciousness of today's liberals to the progressive era. While the progressives did favor certain forms of social equality, they were also fascinated with Darwinism and fashioned their prescriptions around what they imagined were its implications. The minimum wage now carries egalitarian connotations. But Goldberg reminds us that progressive economists originally defended the policy on eugenic grounds. Since black and Chinese laborers could undersell whites, the worry was that "the unfittest might survive at the expense of the fittest" (i.e., Whites). As one progressive put it, "[t]he Coolie cannot outdo the American, but he can underlive him." The progressives wanted to raise the minimum wage "to a white man's worth," in order to restore the races to their proper Darwinian standing, so that the less fit would not outsurvive the more fit.⁵³

And while the liberal narrative celebrates birth control as an important step in women's liberation, Goldberg observes that Margaret Sanger first promoted it by hitching a "racist-eugenic campaign to sexual pleasure and female liberation." In persuading women that birth control was a "necessary tool for their own personal gratification," Sanger "brilliantly used the language of liberation to convince women they weren't going along with a collectivist scheme but were in fact 'speaking truth to power.'"⁵⁴ Here as elsewhere, the problem with liberal individualism is not its excesses but its fraudulence, the unacknowledged collectivism that must unbeknownst to liberals propel them toward one or another form of racializing under the facade of individual rights and moral universalism. Today's liberals will not stand by eugenic ideas as they were originally expounded. But Goldberg believes that the spirit that first

⁵² Kahane, speaking on behalf of the progressives of the Democratic party, explains that "[w]here once we hunted black people down, strung them up on trees, returned them with all the power of the state to their slave masters, and kept them riding in the back of the bus, we now shower them with our tender mercies." (RCR 128)

⁵³ Goldberg, *Tyranny of Cliches*, pg. 106.

⁵⁴ Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 273.

animated these ideas—that “three generations of imbeciles are enough” as Oliver Wendell Holmes notoriously announced in upholding the constitutionality of forced sterilization—“endures in the often unspoken rationale for abortion.” Similarly, the eugenic premise that “the state should pick winners and losers based upon the accidents of birth” continues to live on in liberalism’s affinity for multiculturalism, which likewise subordinates the individual to group-identity.⁵⁵

Just like liberal fascism, liberal racism is subtle and genteel, channeling morally objectionable impulses into an outward beneficence that disguises the underlying impetus. Like liberal fascism, liberal racism consists in a set of general impulses which pre-exist the specific ideologies into which they will crystallize in reflection of the conditions at hand.⁵⁶ The issue is not the present-day conscious intentions of liberals, but the structural possibilities that are latent in their broad political sensibilities. Here as elsewhere, these are revealed in the suppressed history of progressivism, which in exposing the hidden wellsprings of liberalism should compel liberals to accept responsibility for sins they would prefer to associate with either conservatives or America itself.

Liberals attempt to escape this responsibility by defending their color-consciousness as a temporary measure through which to further realize the same ideals as were first defended under the banner of color-blindness. But Goldberg notes that “the color-blind doctrine championed by progressives in the 1960s was a very brief parenthesis in a very long progressive tradition.”⁵⁷ What Goldberg represents as a curious inconsistency and interlude is for liberals a reflection of the fact that America generally was moving to overcome a racism from which no one, including progressives, had been immune. Those at the forefront of this movement first embraced color-blindness as a rallying cry against segregation. With this formally abolished, they now embrace color-consciousness in order to eradicate the ongoing legacy of segregation. There was therefore no “brief parenthesis” in the progressive tradition but rather the logical unfolding and purification of an egalitarian impulse. But Goldberg seeks to subdue liberalism, and he does so by recasting what purports to be a logical unfolding as a rationalizing ideology that conceals a

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 253-254.

⁵⁶ Other claimants have suggested that the progressives’ affinity for eugenics lives not, not only in specific liberal policy prescriptions, but also in liberalism’s general elitism. Codevilla writes that “[a]s the nineteenth century ended, the educated class’ religious fervor turned to social reform: they were sure that because man is mere part of evolutionary nature, man could be improved, and that they, the most highly evolved of all, were the improvers. (TRC 17) Ingraham observes that though the liberal intellectuals of today don’t employ the “wild-eyed eugenic rhetoric” of their predecessors, “we can still pick out several general strains of their thought that have miraculously survived to the present day,” not only in their support for abortion and euthanasia, but also in “their continuing contempt for regular people and the way they wish to live their lives, the same antireligious ideology, the faith in an imposed “world government,” and the distrust of democracy.” (SUS 21)

⁵⁷ Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 254.

darker story. The implication is that the “brief parenthesis” of the 1960s was a conceptual expedient through which the progressive tradition transitioned from a cruder, overtly racializing talk of “Coolies” to the subtler, more sophisticated variety of racism that motivates liberals’ special solicitude for minorities via multiculturalism and affirmative action.⁵⁸ As in his analysis of liberal fascism, Goldberg is engaging in a political psychoanalysis that distinguishes liberalism proper from its civilizing sublimations, in order to expose how an ostensibly repudiated past lives on in the hidden depths of the present, endowing liberalism with a subterranean structure that liberals will not acknowledge to others or even to themselves.

* * *

If liberals have successfully immunized themselves to charges of racism, this is because they have, as with fascism, succeeded in pinning the label on conservatives. One expedient in this effort, argues Goldberg, has been the ideological invocation of “Social Darwinism,” a label which has been used to insinuate some kind of moral and intellectual affinity between the economic libertarianism of nineteenth-century free-marketers and the atrocities of 20th century Nazis. Social Darwinism is an “alchemist trick” which in transmogrifying “the gold of freedom into the lead of Hitlerism” is routinely invoked by the Left to collectively defame conservatives.⁵⁹ Social Darwinism has become a placeholder for “All Bad Things having to do with genetics, fascism, racism, evolution, free-markets, or any human behavior that might be seen as callousness of a right-wing sort.”⁶⁰ You “can be a Social Darwinist if you believe in small government and the free market.” But you can also be a Social Darwinist “if you believe in herding the lesser races and enfeebled into camps.”⁶¹ This political ethnocentrism posits the ideals of liberalism as the Archimedean standpoint from which the motivations of conservatives may be inferred, so that racism and libertarianism become ideological cousins merely because liberals oppose, or claim to oppose, both. The result is that conservatives are expected “to atone for the racism, real and alleged, of various dead conservatives” while liberals are relieved of the need to explore “their own historical association with

⁵⁸ See Lasch 185 (“The children of privilege are urged—even required—to learn something about ‘marginalized, suppressed interests, situations, traditions,’ but blacks, Hispanics and other minorities are exempted from exposure to ‘otherness’ in the work of ‘Western white males.’” An insidious double standard, masking as tolerance, denies those minorities the fruits of the victory they struggled so long to achieve: access to the world’s culture. The underlying message that they are incapable of appreciating or entering into that culture comes through just as clearly in the new academic ‘pluralism’ as in the old intolerance and exclusion; more clearly, indeed, since exclusion rested on fear more than contempt.”)

⁵⁹ Goldberg, *Tyranny of Cliches*, pg. 100.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 100.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 103.

eugenics,” to consider the possibility that “there is something inherent to a ‘pragmatic’ ideology of do-goodery that makes it susceptible to eugenic ideas.”⁶² If this obliviousness seems natural, this simply bespeaks the success with which liberals have intellectualized and sublimated racist-eugenic motivations and then projected these disavowed impulses onto conservatives, who are now held responsible for the sins of liberals as well as their own.

The outraged liberal will retort that the truth of Goldberg’s historical claims is irrelevant because he personally eschews eugenics, disavows any eugenic rationales for the policies he does support, and indeed had never even heard of the “historical association” between progressivism and eugenics before learning of it from Goldberg. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression respond that this outrage at guilt by association is merely testimony to liberal privilege. For liberals are merely being forced to encounter for the first time what is the daily lot of the conservative, who is condemned as racist or incipiently racist in disregard of his stated position as an individual human being, and simply because liberals have judged him guilty of a generalized right-wing callousness that renders him suspect in every regard. If liberals refuse to accept the professed motivations of conservatives at face value, then conservatives will respond in kind, and mete out to liberals the same medicine to which conservatives are well accustomed.

Taking this under advisement, the liberal may then reply that while he will answer to any specific flesh-and-blood conservatives whose motivations he may have mischaracterized, these vaporous complaints about some general historical distortion of conservatism are of no interest to him. But the critical theory of the Right reveals that this response too is also just a species of liberal privilege. And the conservative claimant of cultural oppression will no more accept this response than would the radical feminist accept the argument that a sexually abused or denigrated woman can have no grievance against a pornographer because the woman depicted in his product was not her but some other woman, or because the man who abused or denigrated her was not the pornographer but some other individual who may or may not have consumed the pornographer’s specific product. Catherine MacKinnon writes:

If pornography is an act of male supremacy, its harm is the harm of male supremacy made difficult to see because of its pervasiveness, potency, and success in making the world a pornographic place. Specifically, the harm cannot be discerned from the objective standpoint because it *is* so much of “what is.”⁶³

The trouble with this individuated, atomistic, linear, isolated, tortlike—in a word, positivistic—conception of the injury is that the way pornography targets and defines women for abuse and

⁶² Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 245

⁶³ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), pg. 154.

discrimination does not work like this. It does hurt individuals, not *as* individuals in a one-at-a-time sense, but as members of the group “women.” Harm is caused to one individual woman rather than another essentially the way one number rather than another is caused in roulette. But on a group basis, as women, the selection process is absolutely selective and systematic. Its causality is essentially collective and totalistic and contextual. To reassert atomistic linear causality as a *sine qua non* of injury—you cannot be harmed unless you are harmed through this etiology—is to refuse to respond to the true nature of the specific kind of harm.⁶⁴

The Left is the Right and the Right is the Left because, here as elsewhere, the instruments of left-critique “fill out” the logical lacunae of conservative claims of cultural oppression. Whether the injury be to women or to conservatives, the chains of causation are subtle, indirect, incremental in their impact, and do not lend themselves to any decisive empirical confirmation. But this is, in the one case as in the other, owing to the very nature of the oppression being alleged, which is not any less real for being holistic rather than atomistic. And conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe, just like MacKinnon, that the honest exercise of our general social intelligence nevertheless permits us to recognize recurring patterns of association that combine to subserve an unspoken narrative of collective defamation, and that the unwillingness or inability to recognize that narrative bespeaks a vested interest in its perpetuation. If liberals cannot recognize liberal domination, the reason is that this domination has come to constitute “so much of ‘what is.’”

Whether or not the liberal in question has personally slandered any particular conservative, he benefits from the general practice of slandering conservatives, because the social hierarchy which these slanders have engendered has now been built into the liberal identity and the broader social space that it inhabits. He may not have personally accused a non-racist conservative of racism. But he has almost certainly participated in the general discourse of Social Darwinism in one fashion or another, through one lingo or another contributing to a cultural environment in which it becomes possible to associate free markets with slavery or genocide. Even where liberals do not directly accuse conservatives of racism, the latter know that they are socially vulnerable to the charge, which gives liberals a power-advantage that they wield irrespective of their conscious designs. And this suffices to implicate them in the cultural oppression of conservatives. If the grievances of conservatives seem downright hallucinatory to liberals, this is for the same reason the grievances of feminists seem hallucinatory to many men (and some women), because a standard of atomistic causality is held up to obscure the essentially collective, totalistic, and contextual nature of the injury. In permitting liberals to insinuate without stating, this background simply immunizes liberals to confrontation and argument, rendering their conservaphobia all the more invisible.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pgs. 156-57.

Coulter highlights this kind of totalistic injury in her analysis of the battle over the judicial appointment of Charles Pickering, who was branded a reactionary and filibustered at the behest of “an oddball collection of pro-abortion left-wingers” while receiving no credit for having put his own physical safety at risk as a prosecutor going after the Ku Klux Klan in the 1960s. Beyond risking life and limb for civil rights to the point of requiring FBI protection, Pickering also sent his children to Mississippi public schools in the 1970s, where they would be surrounded by black faces. He was also supported in his nomination by Charles Evars, brother of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evars. And yet he found himself opposed on the basis of his presumed hostility to “civil rights.”⁶⁵ Could there be a greater injustice? The obvious response to Coulter is that the concern was about how Pickering would rule on any abortion-related controversies, and that his willingness to simply do his job as a prosecutor by upholding the rule of law has no logical bearing on the issue at hand, his stance toward abortion. “Civil rights” is an abstraction of the highest generality, and one can without inconsistency praise Pickering for supporting certain civil rights while opposing his nomination to the federal bench on the basis of his hostility to certain others, like abortion. Unless someone was impugning Pickering’s willingness to faithfully apply federal anti-discrimination laws, his laudable personal history on the race front is simply irrelevant.

But here too, the instruments of left-critique fill out the logical lacunae of conservative claims of cultural oppression. The concern is not the *truth* of a discourse but, as Brown and Halley would say, the discourse’s “subterranean structure or aspects,” how “existing discourses of power fabricate or position subjects, secure and disguise powers, naturalize assumptions, fix privileges, and mobilize norms.” And so the issue here is not whether abortion can be plausibly classified as a “civil rights issue” but how the discourse of civil rights is deployed to collectively defame conservatives as incorrigibly racist. Even if defensible with respect to abortion, the suggestion that Pickering was hostile to “civil rights” functioned to invoke a background narrative that, just like the discourse of Social Darwinism, casts every conservative position as just another expression of a generalized right-wing callousness that right-minded liberals are destined to confront again and again in vastly heterogeneous contexts. Liberal opponents of Pickering may not have directly accused him of racism, but the social prestige of the liberal narrative meant that they didn’t need to in order to insinuate it.

Liberals are quick to discover analogous forms of insinuations in the rhetoric of conservatives. Thomas Ross writes:

The rhetoric of innocence in affirmative action discourse uses one of the most powerful symbols of our culture, the symbol of innocence and its always present opposite, the symbol of the defiled taker. When the white person is called the innocent victim of affirmative action, the rhetorician is

⁶⁵ Ann Coulter, *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob Is Endangering America* (New York: Crown Forum, 2011), pg. 193-94.

invoking not just the idea of innocence but also the idea of the not innocent, the defiled taker. The idea of the defiled taker is given a particular name in one of two ways. First, merely invoking the "innocent white victim" triggers at some level its rhetorically natural opposite, the "defiled black taker." This implicit personification is made explicit by the second part of the rhetoric, the questioning of the "actual victim" status of the black person who benefits from the affirmative action plan. The contrast is between the innocent white victim and the undeserving black taker. The cultural significance of the ideas of innocence and defilement thus gives the rhetoric of innocence a special sort of power.⁶⁶

The upshot here is that those who employ the "rhetoric of innocence" should not be mistaken for the principled defenders of meritocracy that they pretend to be. The narrow logic of their arguments is that individuals disadvantaged by affirmative action are not personally responsible for the wrongs for which affirmative action is intended to compensate and that there exists an unresolved tension between collective reparations and generally agreed upon meritocratic principles. But closer inspection reveals that these arguments are actually the playing out of a racist trope that was once expressed with less subtlety. The rhetoricians of innocence may present themselves as rational deliberators operating in a space of reasons. But they are in fact conduits for a culturally transmitted racism for which their seemingly respectable defenses of meritocracy are mere vehicles. The defender of meritocracy holds himself out as seeking to induce a kind of reflective equilibrium that will compel his interlocutor to repudiate affirmative action. But he is fundamentally disingenuous as to the character of the language game he is playing, which surreptitiously draws on a racial narrative whose contents far transcend the official scope of the argument. He may not entertain self-conscious racial prejudice. But his tone and word choices evokes racial meanings that are familiar to us all.

The question posed by conservative claims of cultural oppression is whether liberals are also "rhetoricians" in Ross's sense, persons seeking to place conservatives in a position analogous to the "defiled black taker." If liberals are "bullies" who foster a "culture of fear and intimidation," as Shapiro alleges, this would be in the same way that the defender of white "innocence" is a bully. The rhetorician of innocence exploits of the social undertones of "innocence" in order to invoke a background narrative that denigrates blacks as impulsive marauders with no respect for others' rights. But in like fashion, the liberal exploits the social undertones of "civil rights" and "Social Darwinism" to invoke a background narrative the effect of which is to trace every conservative idea to the same black well of bottomless nefariousness. The rhetoricians of innocence preempt rational discussion of affirmative action's merits by associating the policy with black looters and rapists. But the rhetoricians of civil rights and Social

⁶⁶ Thomas Ross, *Innocence and Affirmative Action*, 43 Vand. L. Rev. 297, 310 (1990).

Darwinism do the same to conservative ideas by surreptitiously associating them with the worst of what any liberal has ever classified as “right-wing.” Conservatives, then, are not the only ones to resort to “dog-whistle” appeals to prejudice.

What liberals judge to be the intellectual dishonesty of conservatives is more charitably interpreted as the latter’s *reactions* to these dog-whistles, the endless procession of liberal micro-aggressions all enjoying the cover of plausible deniability. The cultural oppression of which conservatives complain is the tension between official foreground and the all-important yet unacknowledged background of Macedo’s transformative liberalism. This background operates, not through argument, but through Shapiro’s “patinas of character assassination,” the cumulative effect of which is to mold sensibilities in a liberal direction. And so it does not much matter whether the conservative in question is actually racist, because racism is understood to be just a symptom of the broader malaise of conservatism itself, which is liberalism’s ultimate target. If conservatives’ reasoning about race, racism, and eugenics seems suspiciously convoluted, this is because that reasoning is merely the medium through which liberalism’s transformative background is being subdued. The injustice from which conservatives suffer being largely surreptitious and unacknowledged, it can only be foregrounded by disregarding the narrow, atomistic rationality in terms of which liberals would prefer to delineate the conceptual stakes in favor of a more holistic approach wherein what might have been treated as narrowly circumscribed questions are reinterpreted as symbolic of recurring patterns laying underneath the surface.

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression will not confine their attention to any narrow, issue-based logic because their perennial issue is always the proper allocation of moral credits and debits within the fabric of American culture. For they judge that they have been cheated on this front and that this general misallocation of moral capital continuously redounds to their disadvantage in ways great and small in sundry spheres of social and political life. If the claimants refuse to “stick to the issues,” as liberals ask them to do, this is for the same reason the social democrat refuses to reduce “justice” to the voluntariness of discrete financial transactions. Conservative claims of cultural oppression seek a form of distributive justice from which everyday justice—whether or not Pickering’s stance on abortion was being misrepresented—is an ideological distraction. If liberals dismiss these claims as a “curious amassing of unrelated beefs about the world,” this is because they have themselves dissolved the underlying coherence through a disingenuously tough-minded atomism and literalism, judging these claims according to intellectual rules upon which they do not insist when it comes to assessing the grievances of blacks, women, and gays, whose collective, totalistic injuries will be recognized as real. The summary

dismissal of conservative claims of cultural oppression, then, is merely a second-order iteration of the very oppression being claimed.

3. The Liberal as Crypto-Aristocrat

No less than its monopoly over the cause of racial equality, liberalism's reputation as the selfless ally of the little guy against the economic powers that be is understood as an oppressive stereotype which must be overthrown if conservatives are to establish cultural and rhetorical equality with liberals. And conservative claims of cultural oppression pursue this end by casting liberals in the role of anti-democratic aristocrats, which conservatives will no longer accept for themselves. As we saw, conservative claims of cultural oppression attribute the rise of "ultra-liberalism" to the mass bohemianization of society. But Himmelfarb emphasizes that the morality of bohemia is also the morality of aristocracy and privilege. Adam Smith observed that

In every civilized society, in every society where the distinction of ranks has once been completely established, there have always been two different schemes or systems of morality current at the time; of which the one may be called the strict or austere; the other liberal, or if you will, the loose system. The former is generally admired and revered by the common people: the latter is commonly more esteemed and adopted by what are called people of fashion.

The "people of fashion," observes Himmelfarb, treat indulgently what Smith calls the "vices of levity"—"luxury, wanton and even disorderly mirth, pursuit of pleasure to some degree of intemperance, the breach of chastity." But the "common people," who are, and *must* be, committed to the strict or austere moral system, regard such vices with the "utmost abhorrence and detestation." For they recognize that these vices are nearly always ruinous to them, even if they can be indulged in with impunity by the people of fashion, whose privilege shields them from the consequences.⁶⁷ That is why "[i]f Europeans do not share our 'obsession,' as they say, with morality, dismissing it disparagingly as 'moralistic,' it is perhaps because their ethos still has lingering traces of their monarchic and aristocratic heritage—those vestiges of class, birth, and privilege that are congenial to a 'loose' system of morality." By contrast, "Americans, having been spared that legacy and having relied from the beginning upon character as a test of merit and self-discipline as the precondition of self-government, still pay homage to 'republican virtue.'"⁶⁸

Liberals view themselves as forward-thinking emancipationists and excoriate social conservatives as retrograde moral authoritarians. But Himmelfarb's argument is that they are in fact today's "people of

⁶⁷ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures: A Searching Examination of American Society in the Aftermath of Our Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), pg. 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* pgs. 19-20.

fashion.” For the morality defended by liberals was in the first instance the morality of the aristocracy, of those more greatly tolerated by those who sat at the *right* of the France’s National Assembly. And so liberals are in reality defending the atavistic residue of a feudal past. The Left is the Right and the Right is the Left because it is today’s Left, with its exaltation of social freedom and expressive individualism, which is the true descendent of yesterday’s Right, just as it is today’s Right, with its concern for the self-restraint of “traditional morality,” that is the true descendent of yesterday’s Left, a defender of the “common people” against the aristocratic decadence that would ruin them. As we saw, Corey Robin charges that conservatism by its very nature seeks to “make medievalism modern.” But this is yet another liberal projection as conservatives see it, because this is precisely what liberals are themselves doing when they attack traditional morality.

It is a perennial theme of conservative claims of cultural oppression that the secular, morally libertarian culture defended by liberals unfairly advantages the cultural elites at the expense of those who can least do without the traditional morality and religion that liberalism undermines. Robert Bork warns:

Persons capable of high achievement in one field or another may find meaning in work, may find community among colleagues, and may not particularly mind social and moral separation otherwise. Such people are unlikely to need the more sordid distractions that popular culture now offers. But very large segments of the population do not fall into that category. For them, the drives of liberalism are catastrophic.⁶⁹

It is no coincidence that the liberal vision is advanced by those whose professional stature provides their lives with a meaning and coherence of which the erosion of traditional religion and morality deprives the silent majority—which is consequently left susceptible to a mass of debilitating social ills that the elites will never have occasion to face. It may be of no great consequence when a tenured radical rails against the repressiveness of bourgeois norms from within the safe confines of the ivory tower. But it is of far greater moment when the less privileged, and especially the underclass, absorbs these adversarial attitudes, in the process rejecting the only values that could save their members from crime, drug addiction, illegitimacy, etc. If conservatives are critical of the underclass’s habits, this then reflects, not racism or any other prejudice, but the simple fact that liberalism has inflicted the greatest damage among the most vulnerable. Himmelfarb observes that a level of delinquency which a white suburban teenager can indulge with relative impunity may be “literally fatal to a black inner city teenager.”⁷⁰ And Goldberg charges that, not content to just personally indulge in Dionysian excess, “today’s secular royalty” of

⁶⁹ Robert H. Bork, *Slouching toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Regan Books, 2003), pg. 63.

⁷⁰ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pg. 244.

Hollywood liberals “feel compelled to export values only the very rich and very admired can afford.” Madonna could urge her followers to cast off their bourgeois sexual hang-ups. But whereas she could simply settle down with a husband and kids once she wearied of this, the “lower-middle-class girls from Jersey City who took her advice” were not so lucky.⁷¹

These injuries are not only tolerated but on some level *willed*. Sowell charges that the black underclass have become “mascots” of Left intellectuals, whose “real agenda” is “to score points against American society” by exploiting the underclass as a counter-cultural symbol of resistance to hegemony.⁷² In a similar vein, Himmelfarb accuses that the “new class” that reigns within the media, the academy, the professions, and government is the “mirror image” of, and has a “symbiotic relationship” with, the underclass, which is being exploited to symbolize the new class’s embrace of avant-garde values.⁷³ Making much the same point, Bill O’Reilly laments that “the S-P [secular-progressive] crowd, especially the mainstream media, has glorified the gangsta world and, indeed, makes money from it. Those white, middle-aged, ponytailed music executives are no better than crack dealers. They know their product dehumanizes its constant customer and encourages awful behavior.”⁷⁴

Whereas liberals would trace the plight of the poor to racism, the excesses of capitalism, and above all the indifference of conservatives, the latter trace it to the cultural ambitions and excess of the liberal elites. Liberals think themselves tolerant. But this tolerance is a disingenuous façade, merely another liberal ruse. For moral relativism and subjectivism are not the overcoming of ideology—as the liberal narrative presents them—but, on the contrary, ideologies through which to legitimate the degradation which the people of fashion would inflict on the common people. For their dissoluteness augments the political and cultural capital of the Left just as vast armies of low-wage workers augments the profits of industrialists. Their moral and spiritual degradation has become the currency of liberal ambition, as liberals seize upon this degradation as an occasion to demand further wealth transfers or greater understanding for behaviors heretofore considered deviant, in every case furthering the vision of the anointed at the expense of traditional values and those who need them.

As did the bourgeoisie for Marx, the liberal elites exercise an illegitimate dominion over the means of production. They produce symbols and ideas rather than material goods. But through these they impact the moral lives of the non-elites just as large corporations impact their economic lives and physical safety. And like all dominant groups, the liberal elites are accustomed, and therefore blind, to the

⁷¹ Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Cliches*, pg. 178.

⁷² Thomas Sowell, *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (Encounter Books, 2005), pg 56.

⁷³ Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society*, pg. 244.

⁷⁴ O’Reilly, *Culture Warrior*, pg. 149.

disproportionate power they wield. Unacquainted with the anomie which their dominion inflicts on the less privileged, they are naturally incredulous before conservative claims of cultural oppression. But then this incredulity is just a symptom of their inability to empathize with subordinated classes. Like the callousness of nineteenth century capitalists toward the suffering of their workers, the callousness of today's liberal elites toward the common people is facilitated by inhumanly abstract conceptions of freedom, a simplistic "my liberty ends at your nose" ethic that refuses to recognize the chains of social interconnectedness which give democratic majorities a legitimate interest in regulating their moral environments. If liberals believe that state regulation is a legitimate means of redressing gross inequalities of economic power, then conservatives insist that some forms of morals legislation may be required to protect those whose cultural influence is being unjustly marginalized by the media and Hollywood. The left, notes D'Souza, is "unfailingly vigilant in exposing business for polluting the natural environment," but "when is the last time a liberal democrat denounced Hollywood or the music industry for polluting the moral environment?"⁷⁵ Conservatives, then, are not as liberals would have it meddlesome moralists trying to foist their personal preferences on unwilling others, but socially-minded egalitarians who hold liberals accountable for the externalities that their liberalism inflicts on non-liberals—like Goldberg's forgotten lower-middle-class girls of Jersey City.

This illegitimate dominion will be defended under the banner of freedom. But just as the Left relativizes the value of the economic liberty valorized by libertarians to the interests of capitalists, so conservatives relativize the value of expressive autonomy cherished by liberals to the culture of wordsmiths, artists, and entertainers. Bork thus observes that the student radicals of the 1960s were subsequently attracted to the kinds of careers that would allow them to influence opinions and attitudes,⁷⁶ their ultimate passion. Only for those possessing a particularly strong penchant for symbolic manipulation—and the social privilege that permits one to indulge in it—can the radical expressive individualism advanced by the courts and other liberalizing institutions carry anything the value assigned to it by the liberal culture. It is only the molders of opinion and sensibility whose career paths require an unqualified right to continually transgress the boundaries of decency and good taste. This is why the 1960s was, as Kimball says, a revolution "of the privileged, by the privileged, and for the privileged."⁷⁷ It was a revolution, not of individualists against collectivists, but of one collective against another, of the people of fashion against the common people, whose cause has now been taken up by conservatives.

⁷⁵ Dinesh D'Souza, *The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and its Responsibility for 9/11* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), pg. 132.

⁷⁶ Bork, *Slouching toward Gomorrah*, pg. 51.

⁷⁷ Kimball, *The Long March*, pg. 248.

Himmelfarb's contraposition of an egalitarian conservatism humbly embodying austere republican virtue and a liberalism of the socially privileged disposed to indulge in aristocratic vice is advanced as a thesis about the social determinants of poverty. But it is also a conservative claim of cultural oppression addressing the plight of the *political* underclass, conservatives, which labors under a reputation of callous indifference to the economic one. Once again, the ultimate goal is to subdue liberalism. And this goal is pursued by conceptualizing the problem of inequality in a way that substitutes cultural power for economic power as the fulcrum of class warfare, and thereby assigns responsibility for the plight of the underclass to the morally libertarian Left rather than the economically libertarian Right.

Goldberg notes that we have been trained to believe that the conservative businessman is uniquely callous to the plight of the less privileged, the one most likely to say "let them eat cake!" But this is "a form of cultural propaganda." For "the most obvious inheritors of the cocooned arrogance and self-indulgence we associate with members of the monarchical courts of Europe are to be found not in boardrooms, but among the most celebrated liberals of American life: Hollywood celebrities." It is, after all, the glitterati of Hollywood, and not sober-minded CEOs, who hire out "a private retinue of vassals, tutors, and hangers-on" to "recreate a private court no less opulent and self-indulgent than the entourages of seventeenth-century France." It is the liberal glitterati of Hollywood, not bourgeois conservatives, who "travel with full-time aromatherapists, masseuses, acupuncturists, and, one presumes, court jesters." And it is likewise the former, not the latter, who attempt to recreate the sumptuary laws and rules of grammar through which kings and queens once codified their privilege. No CEO, no matter how successful, would think to bar people from photographing his elbows, as has Jennifer Lopez, or hire an assistant whose only job was to hand him towels, as has Mariah Carey.⁷⁸ Some conservative businesspeople may underpay their workers, but they do not treat them as mere vassals—as did Barbara Streisand when she instructed that employees of the MGM Grand avoid eye-contact with her as she performed there.⁷⁹

Liberals will dismiss these indictments as fatuous and politically irrelevant. Frank writes that the vanity, narcissism, and preening self-righteousness of Hollywood celebrities "are all products of capitalism as surely as are McDonald's hamburgers and Boeing 737s."⁸⁰ But Goldberg is suggesting that capitalism as such cannot explain the very wide discrepancies in behavioral norms between these liberal celebrities

⁷⁸ Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Cliches*, pgs. 175-76.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 98.

⁸⁰ Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, pgs. 240-42.

and those who most clearly embody the spirit of capitalism, conservative businesspeople. Amorphous and intangible though it may seem, “culture” is no mere superstructure of economic power relations and rather enjoys a self-subsistent life of its own. If liberals deny this, the reason is that they have a vested ideological interest in doing so, because they can thereby conceal that they pursue *their* self-aggrandizement culturally rather than economically. They may be egalitarian in rhetoric, but they have merely opted for one egoistic currency over another and then exalted that preference as moral superiority. Conservatives’ suspicions that liberals are basely motivated by “social pretension, dilettantism, or effete sentimentality,” as Nunberg says, are not just opportunistic ad hominem swipes, but part and parcel of this basic conviction in the *autonomy of culture* as a social force and wellspring of human motivation.

It is often said that conservatives exploit cultural wedge issues to “distract” attention away from economic ones. But it is more accurate to say that they seek to *fuse* the cultural and the economic by assigning liberal economic policies a specific cultural meaning with which ordinary Americans cannot be expected to identify. Thus, Codevilla writes that Woodrow Wilson “spoke for the thousands of well-off Americans who patronized the spas at places like Chautauqua and Lake Mohonk.” By “such upper-middle-class waters,” these progressives imagined themselves to “the world’s examples and the world’s reformers” and “dreamed big dreams of establishing order, justice, and peace at home and abroad.”⁸¹ Liberalism is thus understood to be a pastime of the privileged, akin to spa visits, a form of self-flattery and reverie in which ordinary Americans worried about paying the bills and putting food on the table can ill-afford to indulge. Some affluent liberals may be prepared to pay higher taxes out of consistency with their liberalism, but this is merely the price of their conspicuous consumption, the consumer product being liberalism itself. If liberals are, as George Will alleges, contemptuous of the average Wal-Mart shopper, this is because he is merely looking for an affordable large-screen television and cannot afford the higher-end product line of liberal condescension—the psychological payoff being pursued through liberal policies.

In this vein, Irving Kristol argues that the consumer and environmental movements represent novel variants of age-old aristocratic contempt for the bourgeoisie’s unacceptably quotidian preoccupation with the everyday needs of ordinary people.⁸² These movements may avow that they are responding to the deformation of the people’s true preferences by the power of advertising and other undemocratic social forces. But these rationales merely betray the need to disguise atavistic aristocratic

⁸¹ Codevilla, *The Ruling Class*, pg. 17.

⁸² Irving Kristol, *The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals*, *Encounter*, October 1979, 5-14, 8.

pretensions to superior taste in the democratic garb of hard-nosed public-mindedness. The essence of liberalism is to serve as an outlet for various aristocratic pretensions, of which public displays of *noblesse oblige* toward the needy is only one component. What Sowell calls the vision of the anointed is thus a politicized and intellectualized variant of what the people of fashion have always believed about the common people. Where the aristocrats of old looked down upon the peasantry, today's liberals look down upon the ordinary American, whose unrefinement is now castigated in political terms, as a lack of "awareness." Like liberal fascism and liberal racism, what liberals defend as their commitment to the public interest is just the creative adaptation of ancient, now discredited impulses to novel conditions.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression do not defend big business (or the Republican Party) at all costs, and will happily attack them so long as the malfeasance in question can in some way be associated with the cultural prominence of liberal sensibilities—which have predictably made inroads into supposedly conservative sectors. That some high-ranking corporate executives have renounced their citizenship in order to qualify for certain tax breaks suggests to Ingraham, not untrammelled greed or the natural logic of capitalism, but "an unpleasant whiff of elitist post-Americanism."⁸³ In a similar vein, Gelernter argues that corporations are prepared to cut deals with human-rights violators like China and Saudi Arabia because, having been "[c]ut off from history and their own national and religious traditions," today's "globalists" are now "adrift on the amoral seas of international business, where such ideas as liberty and truth, justice and democracy are either dead weight or liabilities."⁸⁴ In other words, the problem is not the incentives generated by capitalism as such, but that capitalism has become culturally inflected by the liberal dispensation, which undermines its ability to be morally self-regulating. It thus turns out that corporate CEOs are in their own way just as susceptible to the blandishments of liberalism as the forgotten girls of Jersey City.

It is "negative orientation to privilege," writes Codevilla, that distinguishes the corporate officer who wants his company to grow by producing a better product at a lower cost from his colleague who wants his company to join the "Business Roundtable of large corporations" whose close ties to government will move it closer to the taxpayer-subsidized feeding trough. It is also "negative orientation to privilege" that distinguishes "the school-teacher who resents the union to which he is forced to belong for putting the union's interests above those of parents wishing to choose their children's schools."⁸⁵

⁸³ Ingraham, *Shut Up & Sing*, pgs. 24-25.

⁸⁴ Gelernter, *America Lite*, pg. 151.

⁸⁵ Codevilla, *The Ruling Class*, pg. 55.

Corporate America (and therefore its Republican backers) may be properly criticized, but its vices are not uniquely nefarious or conservative, because they are ultimately symmetrical with those motivating the traditional constituents of the Democratic Party. If Republicans appear to act inconsistently with their professed commitments to laissez-faire principles by disbursing “corporate welfare,” this is not, as the Left believes, because Republicans are just the designated servants of specific class interests, but a reflection of the growing hegemony of cultural liberalism. Having eroded America’s traditional “negative orientation toward privilege” in the case of its traditional clients, like teachers’ unions, liberalism has now infiltrated big business, where the negative orientation is being eroded as well. Big business and big government are just two alternative vehicles through which the people of fashion prosecute their war against the austere Republican virtue bequeathed by the founders, against the “negative orientation toward privilege” of the common people.

With the economic and the cultural having been blurred into each other in this manner, it is only a short step to the suggestion that it is liberals, not conservatives, who are implicated in an unholy alliance with corporate America. And Goldberg suggests precisely this. “[T]here’s virtually no major issue in the culture wars,” he writes, “where big business has played a major role on the American right while there are dozens of examples of corporations supporting the liberal side.”⁸⁶ After all, corporations “have accepted the totalitarian logic of diversity gurus,” who insist that “if you aren’t actively promoting diversity—with goals, timetables, and the like—you are actively opposing it.”⁸⁷ John Ransom detects the same kind of encroachment in Citibike, a bike-sharing program established as part of the federal bailout of Citigroup, which he dismisses as a wasteful program that merely subsidized the “feel-good hipness of those who know better than you,” thereby allowing rich and privileged liberals to advertise their environmental bona fides.⁸⁸ Liberals’ collaboration with corporate America reveals that they have never been categorically committed to equality as such, and have only wielded the ideal as a cudgel against the bourgeois culture. This was formerly epitomized America’s stodgy, old-fashioned patrician class. But with America’s upper crust now repudiating traditional values and signing onto avant-garde ones like diversity and environmentalism, they have correspondingly endeared themselves to progressives, who will now pursue their egalitarianism at the expense of others who have not signed on, the ordinary Americans who continue to resist the liberal dispensation. Harris thus observes that today’s “self-described progressives” are quite well connected to big corporations and usually “display nothing but contempt for the Chamber

⁸⁶ Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 312.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pg. 315.

⁸⁸<http://finance.townhall.com/columnists/johnransom/2014/05/26/another-liberal-amenity-for-the-urban-upper-class-courtesy-taxpayers-n1843333/page/full>

of Commerce mentality of America's small-business people."⁸⁹ The latter are not people of fashion, after all, and so their interests and values must be disregarded.

* * *

All this might be dismissed as just a long line of intellectually gratuitous ad hominem attacks. After all, the narcissistic self-indulgence of Hollywood celebrities can have no logical bearing on the question of whether upper-income tax rates are fair or should be raised. Whether or not the typical CEO possesses more common decency than Barbara Streisand, his decision to outsource jobs to China is exponentially more consequential than her personal treatment of hotel staff. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe that the "real issues" cannot be the subject of logical, undistorted communication under the present cultural dispensation, in which conservatives have ahead of time been adjudged morally bankrupt by virtue of a silent but nevertheless palpable defamatory narrative. "Day after day," laments Codevilla, "the Ruling Class's imputations—racist, stupid, prone to violence, incapable of running things—hit like artillery cover for the advance of legislation and regulation to restrict and delegitimize."⁹⁰ Conservative claims of cultural oppression are not assessments of the proposed legislation but responses to the artillery cover that precedes it, not ordinary political discourse but a meta-discourse aiming to transform the conditions under which ordinary political discourse transpires. "Identity politics" are not a mere distraction from the substantive questions, because the balance of power on this front is the ineluctable background against which "substantive" issues are conceptualized and debated.

This this is something that the Left is able to recognize when it comes to its own causes. The consciousness-raising exhorted by the critical theorists of the Left, along with their imputations of structural or unconscious racism, sexism, and homophobia are not as a strict logical matter germane to determining the highest-order principles of distributive justice according to which the just deserts of blacks, women, and gays should be adjudicated. Yet these identity-based concerns are not dismissed as idle distractions from more "serious" bread-and-butter issues, because it is understood that the former cannot but impinge on the latter. But rhetorical rules of the road which may be properly adopted by academic elites in defense of their preferred victims are dismissed as anti-intellectual ad hominems whenever invoked by conservatives on behalf of ordinary Americans. The Left is permitted to "subdue"

⁸⁹ Lee Harris, *The Next American Civil War: The Populist Revolt Against the Liberal Elite* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pg. 48.

⁹⁰ Codevilla, *The Ruling Class*, pg. 63.

its ideological opponents through “aggressive demystification.” But conservatives who undertake to do the same are accused of harboring “a curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs with the world.”

Seen in this light, the question is not whether conservatives’ anti-aristocratic discourse is intellectually honest, but whether it is any more dishonest than liberalism and its myriad anti-conservative discourses. Sowell argues that the left-right dichotomy as traditionally construed is “a somewhat Ptolemaic view of the political universe, with the political left being in the center of the universe and all who differ—in any direction—being called the ‘right.’” This, says Sowell, is what allows liberals to suggest that “fascists are just more extreme versions of ‘conservatives,’ in the same sense in which socialism is a more extreme version of the welfare state,” and so dismiss liberalism’s opponents through guilt by association.⁹¹ But if the Left will permit itself to associate conservatives with fascists merely because both can, in very different ways, be set in opposition to the empty abstraction of “equality,” then conservative claimants of cultural oppression will respond in kind. They will offer their own Ptolemaic system centering around their own empty abstraction that facilitates their own brand of guilt by association—a system in which environmentalism, diversity, and teachers’ unions are no less than special favors to investment banks set in opposition to “negative orientation toward privilege.” The critical theory of the Right concerns itself with power rather than truth and sees truth in whatever promises to undermine liberal power.

4. The Liberal as Crypto-Imperialist

The displacement of the economic by the cultural can also have foreign policy implications. Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*, which initiated the author’s notoriety as a conservative commentator, made a point of upbraiding the multicultural Left’s hypocrisy in celebrating non-Western cultures as the noble victims of Western imperialism while papering over the inconvenient fact that many of these unselfconsciously racist, chauvinistic, and homophobic cultures reject the values for which the Left claims to stand.⁹² The Left refuses to denounce such cultures as barbaric and retrograde because it seeks to maintain victim solidarity between the Third World and women, homosexuals, and other minorities in America, who it believes suffer under the yoke of the same oppression.⁹³ But then these Left multiculturalists are in reality using the Third World for their own purposes, turning its peoples into

⁹¹ Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (New York: Basic Books 1995), pg. 209.

⁹² Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pg. 86.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 80.

mouthpieces for their sophisticated left-wing critiques of American society, ethnocentrically imposing their own political categories on foreign cultures where they are not at home.⁹⁴ In “subordinat[ing] the understanding of Asia, Africa, and Latin America to Western ideological prejudices” the Left had embarked on a “new cultural imperialism no less narrow and bigoted than that of colonialist researchers in safari outfits and pith helmets.”⁹⁵

D’Souza’s later *The Enemy at Home* also accuses the Left of cultural imperialism, but in a way which inverts the argument of *Illiberal Education*. *The Enemy at Home* is a response to the claim, popular within the Left, that it was American foreign policy which precipitated the 9/11 attacks, and that America therefore bears a share of the responsibility for them. While most conservatives decry such self-reproach as un-American at best and treasonous at worst, D’Souza concedes that it carries a grain of truth. Those who maintain that 9/11 was the predictable consequence of American decisions are not altogether off the mark, for there is indeed a sense in which “We made them do this to us.” But what these leftists overlook is that “it is precisely *they*—their actions and values—and not the foreign policy decisions of conservatives or mainstream liberals, which are the root cause of the problem.”⁹⁶ Muslim rage toward America has been fueled by the imperialistic ambitions of the cultural Left, which has “fostered a decadent American culture that angers and repulses traditional societies, especially those in the Islamic world that are being overwhelmed with this culture.” The Left, charges D’Souza, has been “waging an aggressive global campaign to undermine the traditional patriarchal family and to promote secular values in non-Western cultures,”⁹⁷ imposing its own “liberal family values”⁹⁸ on those who reject them. Along with various multinational treaties and international conferences, the United Nations “provides the left with venues through which to elevate their own priorities into universal human rights” and then bully non-Western leaders into adopting them.⁹⁹ These are America’s real crimes against the rest of the world. Muslim resentment toward America is the Third World’s understandable response, not to any economically or militarily imperialistic foreign policy decisions, but to the cultural decadence that the liberal elites cultivate at home and then export abroad in the name of freedom. Muslims do indeed resent some aspects of American foreign policy, like support for Israel. But this is a mere conflict of interest, not an existential threat to Islam.¹⁰⁰ By contrast, what Muslims judge to be “the coercive transmission of

⁹⁴ Ibid. pg. 72.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pg 81.

⁹⁶ D’Souza, *The Enemy at Home*, pg. 3.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pg. 2.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pg. 154.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pg. 260.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pg. 102.

corrupt American values to the Muslim world” is just such a threat.¹⁰¹ This cannot but yield a festering resentment and desire to lash out, which are what culminated in 9/11.

Many conservatives believe that Muslims hate the West because they hate the values of prosperity, freedom, and democracy. But this is a misunderstanding:

[W]hat angers religious Muslims is not the American Constitution but the scandalous sexual mores they see in American movies and television. What disgusts them is not free elections but the sights of hundreds of homosexuals kissing one another and taking marriage vows. The person that horrifies them the most is not John Locke but Hillary Clinton.¹⁰²

The D’Souza of *Illiberal Education* posited a very wide chasm between the values of the Third World and those of Western modernity. But the D’Souza of *The Enemy at Home* minimizes the divide, arguing that most Muslims are not radicals but traditionalists, who just like American conservatives embrace freedom and democracy, and merely insist that that these principles be construed consistently with their traditional values. Muslims in the developing world may not support the full gamut of rights and liberties to which we have grown accustomed. But it is to be expected that the meaning of freedom and democracy will be inflected by local traditions. Given that “most European countries have democratically chosen to relinquish some of their economic liberties in the interest of economic security,” why “can’t Muslim countries choose to give up some of their civil liberties in order to promote civic morality?”¹⁰³

With the differences between Islam and the West having been suitably downplayed, D’Souza is positioned to offer a solution to the problems which ultimately precipitated 9/11. And this is an alliance between Muslim and Christian traditionalists. As a result of the Left’s prominent role in international activism and popular culture, “traditional Muslims see one America and do not realize that there are two Americas,”¹⁰⁴ do not realize that many Americans share their revulsion toward the pornographic culture that the cultural Left pushes on Christians and Muslims alike. It is therefore incumbent upon conservatives to convey to traditional Muslims that they “share common ground” on traditional values.¹⁰⁵ While the Left “is allied with some radical Muslims in opposition to American foreign policy,” the Right is “allied with an even larger group of Muslims in their opposition to American social and cultural depravity.” Winning the war on terror requires creating a wedge between Islamic radicals and the great mass of tradition-minded but non-fanatical Muslims, who can be won over to America’s side.¹⁰⁶ But this requires an honest

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pg. 103.

¹⁰² Ibid., pg. 16.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pg. 280.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pg. 278.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pg. 276.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pg. 25-26.

acknowledgment of Muslim cultural grievances, the first step toward a new solidarity between ordinary Americans and indigenous Third World peoples, both of whom have been victimized by a common enemy, the liberal elites.

* * *

D'Souza's hypothesis attracted few supporters, even among the conservatives for whom his book was written. But *The Enemy at Home* is best understood, not as a thesis of international relations, but as a highly innovative conservative claim of cultural oppression. The underlying impetus is revealed in D'Souza proposal that

The right should organize an international conference on the effects of Hollywood and American popular culture on non-Western cultures. It would be fascinating to hear from Muslims and other traditional people about how their local cultures are being affected by Hollywood movies and TV shows. Besides, on what basis would self-styled American liberals object to a proposal so open-minded and multicultural?¹⁰⁷

Whereas the D'Souza of *Illiberal Education* sought to outflank the Left from the Right, by seizing upon its moral universalism, the D'Souza of *The Enemy at Home* attempts to outflank the Left *from the Left*, by seizing upon its moral relativism. The goal is not just to demonstrate inconsistency or hypocrisy, but to *subdue liberalism, by forcing liberals into the position of conservatives*. For it now the Left, not the Right, that appears to be foisting its own parochialism on unwilling others. And so it is the Left, not the Right, that seems truly guilty of xenophobic intolerance. D'Souza observes that the American media portrayed Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn as a "right-wing extremist" who was assassinated by a radical Muslim on account of his hostility to Muslim immigration, thus associating Islamophobia with the Right. But his was in fact an Islamophobia of the Left. For "as Europeans recognized, Fortuyn was no right-winger" but rather a "flamboyant homosexual whose argument was that Muslim immigrants were, on account of their religious beliefs, threatening the core values of Holland," which included "legal drugs, legal pornography, legal prostitution, and widespread social acceptance of homosexuality."¹⁰⁸ Islam and conservatism are united in their opposition to these currents. And this is why conservatives should be embracing multicultural respect for Islam rather than ceding this territory to the Left, which can never truly tolerate Islam.

The Right has become the Left in order to accuse the Left of having become the right because reconceptualizing imperialism in terms of cultural rather than economic or military dominance allows

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pg. 284.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pg. 125.

D'Souza to reinterpret events that were widely understood to reveal the viciousness of conservatives into symbols for the viciousness of liberals. The Abu Ghraib incident was associated with "prisoner abuse, lack of accountability, and torture," and so was cited as "a textbook case of the abuses of empire." Thus characterized, the abuse of Iraqi detainees naturally redounded to the anti-imperialism narrative of the Left. But D'Souza observes that the incident wasn't terribly egregious as these kinds of abuses go. Far more gruesome forms of torture are commonplace in the Muslim World, which is entirely accustomed to prisoner abuse and unaccountable governments. For these reasons, Abu Ghraib's unique injuriousness must be understood in more culturally specific terms, in terms of what was the *sexual* humiliation and degradation of the Iraqi detainees. These abuses served "as a metaphor for how little Americans care for other people's sacred values, and for the kind of humiliation that America seeks to impose on the Muslim world." The sexual humiliation of the detainees ultimately reflected "the sexual immodesty of liberal America." Liberals would assign responsibility for Abu Graib to the benighted, but D'Souza is suggesting that the perpetrators had on some level internalized the vision of the anointed. Had they been "professors at an elite liberal arts college, their videotaped orgies might easily have become the envy of academia." But being mere "low-life Appalachians," they were simply unequipped to defend their depravity with any "elevated thoughts"¹⁰⁹—as can the liberal elites. This is why liberals refuse to see what was *distinctive* about Abu Graib, because to see this would also be to see their own complicity in creating the moral atmosphere that permitted it.

Will Kymlicka observes that even as contemporary liberals have become more reluctant to impose liberalism on foreign countries, they have also become more willing to impose it on illiberal national minorities. This is inconsistent, however, because the same arguments that are marshaled against the former can be marshaled against the latter. Whether at home or abroad, the forcible imposition of liberalism will be perceived as "a form of aggression or paternalistic colonialism."¹¹⁰ And this is the challenge D'Souza raises for those who ordinarily make it a principle to approach non-western cultures in a spirit of intellectual charity, on the premise that our reflexive aversion to their ostensible illiberalism may be tainted with ethnocentric prejudice. For the upshot of D'Souza's argument is that liberals must treat American traditionalists with the same deference that they would extend to denizens of the developing world. However one weighs the moral costs and benefits of "imposing liberalism," there can be no rational basis for allowing the mere geographic proximity of American traditionalists to enter into the equation.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pg. EH 147-51.

¹¹⁰ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pg. 167.

The Enemy at Home is a cosmopolitan defense of what liberals would prefer to dismiss as the benighted parochialism of American social conservatives. Frank would reduce the cultural grievances of Kansans to the machinations of cynical Republican strategists. But he would have more difficulty extending that analysis to half the world. If those on the Left would dismiss an entire state as a “bunch of yahoos,” as Scarborough alleges, this might be for the same reason why D’Souza believes that “[m]ost people on the left won’t admit that they consider Muslims too backward and fanatical to entrust them with the ballot.”¹¹¹ The discourse of cultural imperialism, traditionally wielded by the left to debunk the pretensions of “white” or “bourgeois” culture is now wielded by conservatives to indict liberalism and its treatment of its own colonized populations—whether this be Muslims abroad or Christians at home, who are therefore natural allies. Conservative America has simply been cast in a role analogous to the one enjoyed by “indigenous cultures” within the Left, just as the Left has been cast in the role of colonial administrators scoffing at native folkways with an arrogant rationalist contempt for inherited tradition. If the D’Souza of *Illiberal Education* could accuse leftists of employing non-Western culture as mouthpieces for their own critiques of American society, then the D’Souza of *The Enemy at Home* appears to have learned a thing or two from them.

5. The Liberal as Crypto-Theocrat

James Hunter observes that whatever mistrust divided Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in an earlier period of American history, these groups were united by an overarching consensus on the basic sources of moral truth, with biblical imagery and metaphor uniting otherwise antagonistic religious traditions. However, the secularization and expanding pluralism of the Twentieth Century has eroded these heretofore uncontested understandings, which formed the unifying backdrop of sometimes virulent doctrinal disagreements. As a result, the pivotal rifts in American life no longer revolve around differences of doctrinal creed. Americans now find themselves most fundamentally divided, not as Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, but as adherents of “orthodoxy” and adherents of “progressivism,” with these earlier groupings now subdividing internally along these new lines. What was heretofore the subject of widespread agreement, the basic sources of moral truth, has now become a source of intense controversy, overshadowing heretofore crucial sectarian differences.¹¹²

Orthodoxy, says Hunter, involves a *commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority*, a “consistent, unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and

¹¹¹ D’Souza, *The Enemy at Home*, pg. 259.

¹¹² James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books 1991), pg. 76.

identity”¹¹³ which presupposes “a dynamic reality that is independent of, prior to, and more powerful than human experience.”¹¹⁴ By contrast, cultural progressivism defines moral authority in primarily “this-worldly” terms that synthesize the “spirit of rationalism and subjectivism” that has come to define the modern age.¹¹⁵ The first element of this synthesis is the tradition of “Enlightenment naturalism,” which grounds moral legitimacy in empirical evidence about the human condition. The second element is the “tradition of Enlightenment subjectivism,” now called “liberal or expressive individualism,” according to which our emotional needs and psychological dispositions enjoy a crucial significance which moral reason cannot ignore.¹¹⁶

This is undoubtedly how most progressives frame their differences with traditionalists. And many traditionalists agree, albeit with a different set of normative valences, as when they plead for the insufficiency of human reason as a moral compass or reduce “Enlightenment subjectivism” to self-indulgent egoism. However, conservative claims of cultural oppression are foremost defined by their implicit or explicit *rejection* of Hunter’s dichotomy. Lasch writes that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the “knowledge classes” is a “skeptical, iconoclastic state of mind,” a commitment to a “culture of criticism” that is “understood to rule out religious commitments.”¹¹⁷ But as we have time and again observed, a skeptical, iconoclastic state of mind is precisely what conservative claims of cultural oppression will not to concede to liberalism. Liberalism is not merely in error as to the proper role of religion in politics and society, but in error as to *itself*, because it fails to recognize that *it*, liberalism, is no less of a religion, no less defined by an “external, definable, transcendent authority,” than the traditional Christianity it despises. The pretense that liberals have transcended religion is a politically expedient sleight-of-hand that disguises what is the attempt of one religion to arrogate a monopoly of legal and political power. A secularist group like People for the American Way, writes Goldberg, “serves as a tireless mason in the construction of the wall between church and state, shrinking the public space for traditional religion and building the foundations of a secular counter-church of liberalism.”¹¹⁸ Liberalism is attacked, not *qua* Enlightenment hubris, but *qua* comprehensive religious creed that merely employs a façade of Enlightenment.

¹¹³ Ibid., pg. 44.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 120.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 44.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 124-25.

¹¹⁷ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), pg. 215.

¹¹⁸ Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 337.

Liberals will dismiss all this as empty rhetoric built on a foundation of logical and semantic confusion. Nunberg writes that conservatives have, in a “semantic sleight of hand,” exploited the ambiguity of the term “secular”— which can denote both active hostility to religion, as in Soviet Communism, and our own very different commitment to keeping religious and political spheres separate—in order to spuriously associate a group like the ACLU with avowedly atheistic totalitarian regimes.¹¹⁹ With American secularism mischaracterized as a comprehensive doctrine that contests religion’s answers to substantive cosmological questions, it becomes easy to then mischaracterize liberalism, the foremost defender of secularism, as a counter-religion of sorts that seeks to supplant traditional religion under a veneer of religious neutrality. But the basic premise seems to rest on the facile semantic equivocation described by Nunberg, conservatives’ obstinate refusal to acknowledge the nature of “secularism” as it exists in *our* society.

However, conservatives’ efforts to “religionize” liberalism rests on more than just this, and rather reflects a general theory of human nature and history that enjoys widespread credence in conservative circles. Bork explains,

The inner need for pervasive meaning was satisfied through most of history in Western civilization by religions. But as religious faith began a retreat, beginning in the eighteenth century and proceeding apace in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the intellectual’s need for meaning did not decline but remained urgent. Now, however, meaning must be found in a secular belief system. It is difficult to think of anything that would fit this specification for most intellectuals other than politics. For a few, meaning might be found in devotion to a field like scientific inquiry, but for the vast majority of intellectuals, for whom no such achievements are possible, politics must be the answer. To be a civil religion, however, this politics cannot be the politics of mundane clashes of material interests and compromises; it must be a politics of ideology.

In our time that means left-wing politics, which offers a comprehensive world view and a promise of ultimate salvation in a utopia that conventional politics cannot offer. The religious impulse underlying left radicalism has been noted. Weber remarked that when certain types of German intellectualism turned against religion, there occurred “the rise of the economic eschatological faith of socialism.” Not only communism but fascism and Nazism were faith systems of the Left, offering transcendental meaning to their adherents.¹²⁰

While these intellectuals believe that their values rest on solid intellectual foundations, they in fact express an “inner need for pervasive meaning.” Having lost their moorings in traditional theistic faith, intellectuals now pursue ad hoc and ersatz spiritual satisfaction elsewhere, in radical politics while disguising their motivations in a façade of sober rationalism and pragmatism. “Deprived of God, human beings will always seek another all explaining creed,” warns London.¹²¹ And this all-explaining creed is

¹¹⁹ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 161.

¹²⁰ Bork, *Slouching toward Gomorrah*, pg. 85.

¹²¹ Herbert London, *America’s Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008), pg. 36.

liberalism itself, the vision of the anointed. Left intellectuals are not just innocently misguided in their views but culpably mistaken in their assessments of their own motivations. For in rejecting traditional religion, they have left themselves psychologically vulnerable to a host of dangerous political seductions at whose behest they would unravel the traditional order, paving the way for both fascism and communism.

It is the allure of secular eschatology, argues Bork, that explains the upheavals of the 1960s. For “[w]ithout reference to a supernatural being, SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] was proposing, largely through politics, to bring their secular vision of the kingdom of God to fruition on earth, now.”¹²² Unrestrained by the humility inculcated by traditional religious teaching, this novel, New Left religiosity represented a narcissistic indulgence in feelings of personal transcendence, the impossible yearning to extricate oneself once and for all from the shackles of inherited tradition and will a new self into being. And like other features of the 1960s, this millenarianism and yearning for transcendence lives on in what has become mainstream liberalism, as in the Supreme Court’s announcement in *Casey v. Planned Parenthood* that “[a]t the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”¹²³ This is not a purely secular ideal, but the secularization of what were formerly experienced as a religious longing to rise above the limitations of ordinary day-to-day existence in the world, which liberals now seek to fulfill politically.

Not all conservatives trace the religious inception of modern liberalism to the 1960s. As we saw, Goldberg tracks the subterranean meaning of liberalism to the Progressive era, which it turns out was just as Christian as it was fascist. While there were indeed secular progressives, progressivism as a movement was “fundamentally Christian.”¹²⁴ Being “dedicated in the most fundamental way to the Christianization of American life,” progressives wanted to smash the wall of separation between church and state.¹²⁵ One prominent progressive, for example, denounced the practice of seeing the world “divided into things sacred and things secular” and asserted that “to a Christian all things must be sacred—his business as well as his church.”¹²⁶ Like Bork, Goldberg believes that these basic impulses live on in contemporary liberalism. Though Hillary Clinton is often seen as a “radical leftist in liberal sheep’s clothing,” she is more accurately viewed “as an old-style progressive and a direct descendant of the Social Gospel movement of

¹²² Bork, *Slouching toward Gomorrah*, pg. 27.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pgs. 103, 87, 111.

¹²⁴ Goldberg, *Tyranny of Cliches*, pg. 82.

¹²⁵ Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 87.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 82.

the 1920s and 1930s.”¹²⁷ The Christian language and imagery may no longer be in vogue, but the same agenda is now defended through “a secularized vocabulary of ‘hope.’”¹²⁸

Whatever their preferred genealogy of liberalism, conservative claimants of cultural oppression are united in the conviction that liberal ideals are post-hoc rationalizations for other-worldly religious passions seeking this-worldly incarnation. The meaning of contemporary liberalism is to be discovered, not in the sober musings of Locke, Kant, or Mill, but in a perverse will to secularize religious impulses that should not be secularized. While liberalism would associate hostility to the separation of church and state with ignorant Bible-thumpers, it is itself ignorant of its own intellectual lineage, which was premised on precisely this hostility. In resisting the liberal agenda, it is therefore conservatives who carry the mantle of secularism. For it is they, not liberals, who are demanding what is all things considered a *higher* wall of separation between church and state. Whereas conservatives who would interject religion into public life ask for little more than a seasonal nativity scene or a few moments of voluntary school prayer, liberal interjectors attempt to erect an entire political order on the foundation of the do-goodery which was once considered the proper purview of churches and synagogues. Conservatives may be the ones speaking in defense of Judeo-Christian values. But it is liberals who seek the more thoroughgoing imposition of those values through their redistributive economic schemes and elsewhere. Modern liberalism, writes Goldberg, “a religion of state worship whose sacrificial Christ was JFK and whose Pauline architect was LBJ.”¹²⁹ Liberals do not couch their commitments in religious terms, of course. But of what moment can this be, ask conservatives, when what matters is the substance of their agenda, not the verbiage? Secular liberalism may be less codified than other theologies, but this informality is simply the measure of its disingenuousness.

* * *

The idea that liberalism immanentizes what were heretofore upheld as transcendent values permits conservative claims of cultural oppression to recast a wide range of political disagreements as a clash of rival sectarian creeds. The tenets of secularism, warns London, “form the basis for a seductive new religion” that is “based upon individual self-directed actions as the source of salvation...and upon manifest disapproval of the transcendent.” And this is in fact a “new form of paganism.”¹³⁰ Thus, what liberals would see as a conflict between imperious moralists seeking to foist their personal values on

¹²⁷ Ibid., pg. 319.

¹²⁸ Ibid., pg. 15.

¹²⁹ Ibid., pg. 215.

¹³⁰ London, *America's Secular Challenge*, pg. 21.

others and noble individualists defending their liberties is reconceptualized as a religious struggle between two collectives, a struggle between Judeo-Christianity and a paganism that ascribes absolute value to this-worldly self-affirmation. Though imagining themselves liberated from old-time religion, liberals have simply regressed into a religious tradition even older and more superstitious than the one they decry. They are defending, not the individual against the collective, but the interests of one sectarian creed against those of another. Their victories herald, not progress toward enlightenment, but devolution toward paganism.

Writing in *The American Conservative*, Donald Devine warns of a resurgent paganism in the imminent triumph of same-sex marriage. Liberals will uphold same-sex marriage as the victory of sexual individualism against the communal restraints represented by traditional Christianity. But Devine believes that this picture stands the truth very nearly on its head. For it was Christianity that first introduced individualism into the world. The denizens of pagan antiquity were thoroughly submerged in clan, cult, tribe, and state. These authoritarian social relations were thoroughly pervaded by sexually exploitative hierarchies, of which the practice of homosexuality was an important component. Though homosexuality may now be associated with individual libertinism, it was originally defended in traditionalist terms, as part and parcel of the old pagan order. Traditional values have always been the formula for overcoming that order. For it was Christianity which, in severing divine authority from Caesar's, first created a space for individualism, offering the family as a refuge from the pagan hierarchies that heretofore submerged the individual. The imminent triumph of gay marriage, then, is but a reassertion of collectivist hierarchy, not a victory for individual freedom. So much is evident in the massive influence that liberal-dominated institutions have wielded on behalf of this cause. These institutions told the American people "that allowing equality in marriage was the moral thing to do." And in doing so, they sought to replace "the individual freedom arising from Christianity" with "an assertion of cultural and political power."¹³¹ This must strike liberals as a convoluted story if ever there was one. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe that this incredulity is simply testimony to liberals' insensibility before their creed's hidden, subterranean heritage, their inability to recognize that gay rights is, just like every liberal cause, vitiated by a subterranean collectivism whose true aims are hidden from us.

Coulter sees a resurgent paganism in environmentalism: Liberals "swoon in pagan admiration of Mother Earth, mystified and overawed by its power" at the same time as they "deny the Biblical idea of dominion and progress, the most ringing affirmation of which is the United States of America."¹³² And

¹³¹ <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/same-sex-marriage-isnt-about-freedom/>

¹³² Coulter, *Godless*, pg. 3.

conservatives believe that this denial has simply caused Christian theology to be recapitulated in pagan/secular terms, as traditional religious impulses seek out corrupted this-worldly vessels. Goldberg thus notes that an “environmentally themed hotel in California has replaced the Bible in all its rooms with [Al] Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*” and that “anyone with kids certainly understands how the invocations to ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ are taught like catechisms in schoolrooms across the country.”¹³³ Liberal environment science is itself the product of this theological perversion. Ingraham explains that the church of “Apocalyptic Manmade Global Warming” has “a holy scripture you cannot question” as well as high priests “whose interpretations are infallible” and whose sermons “warn of hellfire, rising oceans, and plagues as punishment for our sins.”¹³⁴ Environmentalists are obstinate and dogmatic because they have unbeknownst to themselves confounded the secular and the profane, using secular concerns to channel religious impulses that they would reject in their original form, but which are now recapitulated in their secular “idealism.”

David Horowitz detects the residues of Christian theology in politically correct education. Noting that a UC Santa Cruz course requires students to perform sections from the feminist play *The Vagina Monologues* before the class, Horowitz observes that this “was no doubt the procedure in religious monasteries during the Middle Ages, when students were required to perform Morality Plays exemplifying church doctrine.”¹³⁵ What liberals present as progressive “hands on” or “student-centered” education is thus a contemporary variant of an essentially religious ambition. Not content to merely present and argue their radical opinions, leftists seek to furthermore inculcate them through a secularized religious discipline, which they simply refuse to acknowledge as such. The rise of the modern research university is believed to have eclipsed the sectarian denominational colleges in higher education. But the spirit of the latter has in fact been reborn in the former, which has become “a secularized version of the church school, whose purpose was to train students in a religious creed.” This is why academic radicals see academic freedom and intellectual diversity as threats to their “calling.”¹³⁶ What these radicals imagine are their “revolutionary” or “transformative” projects are simply secularized iterations of what was once called “redemption.” And redemption now means redemption from conservatism. The academic radicals

¹³³ Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 382.

¹³⁴ Laura Ingraham, *Power to the People* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2007), pgs., 282-84.

¹³⁵ David Horowitz and Jacob Laskin, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America’s Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), pg. 256.

¹³⁶ David Horowitz, *Indoctrination U.: The Left’s War Against Academic Freedom* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009), pg. 127.

want to create “a world without “racism,” “sexism” or “classism,” and this essentially means the purging of conservatives—a “purification ritual” in which “an army of saints” roots out “the party of sinners.”¹³⁷

The purpose of all these comparisons is not simply to discredit the welfare state, same-sex marriage, environmentalism, or academia, but to subdue liberalism in order to “level the playing field” between the anointed and the benighted. The objective is to establish that liberals and conservatives are *arguing on the same plane* notwithstanding liberals’ presumption that they have moved beyond the sectarian blindness of conservatives. Contrasting their reason to the mere faith of conservatives, liberals believe that they have achieved a new level of existential and epistemic liberation. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression insist that the lines which liberals draw here are blurrier than they are prepared to acknowledge. For what liberals interpret as their liberated condition is actually their enslavement to religious impulses that they fail to recognize as such—but which conservatives, being securely anchored tradition, possess the sagacity and historical memory to recognize. What passes for enlightenment, a stance of critical reflexivity, is merely the medium for religious impulses that, having been eviscerated of substantive ethical content by the process of secularization, must now be expressed self-deceptively.

The difference between religious traditionalism and secular liberalism is not that one is sectarian while the other is cosmopolitan, but that one freely acknowledges its sectarianism while the other conceals it, projecting that sectarianism onto its political enemies. In acknowledging that their rationality is necessarily circumscribed by a pre-rational worldview, conservative claimants of cultural oppression understand themselves to enjoy an awareness that eludes those who arrogantly deny their human limitations, a Socratic humility that is to be contrasted with the epistemic hubris of the liberal elites. The difference between the benighted and the anointed is the difference, not between faith and reason, but between faith and blind faith, between a faith that recognizes itself as faith and a faith that does not.

6. The Liberal as Crypto-Conservative

As we observed with Frank at the outset, ridiculing the “personal tastes and pretensions” of liberals has become the “stock-in-trade” of conservative writers. And nowhere are these examined more closely than in David Brooks’s *Bobos in Paradise*. As we saw, many conservatives believe that the legacy of the 60s consists in bohemia’s colonization of mainstream American life. The overt, unabashed radicalism has subsided. But it lives on surreptitiously in the mores and tastes of a newly liberalized

¹³⁷ Ibid., pg. xxvii.

bourgeoisie and, more consequentially, in the lower orders at whose expense the “new class” aggrandizes itself. But *Bobos in Paradise* suggests that this is a one-sided picture. While the legacy of the 60s does indeed live on in our contemporary tastes and mores, the bohemianism has in fact become *fused* with traditional values in the bourgeois bohemians, or Bobos, a new upper middle-class identity that strives for an always tension-fraught synthesis of a traditional middle-class work-ethic and new vintage countercultural ideals. In a whole host of spheres, from sex to morality to leisure to work, it has become difficult to distinguish the antiestablishment renegade from the pro-establishment company man, who have now become one.¹³⁸

Brooks does not identify the Bobos as liberals. They are moderates by temperament and may hold a variety of economic and foreign policy views. At the same time, bohemia provides one of the two pillars of their identity, and it is clear that they are “culturally liberal” in the sense that aggrieves conservatives—cosmopolitan, multiculturally-inclined, tradition-averse, and egalitarian-minded. But unlike most conservatives, Brooks is prepared to describe that cultural liberalism in rather favorable terms. The old WASP elite was an elite of blood and breeding that was temperamentally anti-intellectual and unselfconsciously accepted its elite status as just part of the fabric of the universe. But as heirs to the counter-culture, the Bobos cannot take their status for granted and are acutely conscious that it must be earned.¹³⁹ Unable to rely on the prestige of inherited family pedigree, they must produce “subtle signifiers that will display [their] own spiritual and intellectual identity.”¹⁴⁰ To this end, they have developed a “code of expressive individualism” that celebrates “endless innovation, self-expansion, and personal growth.”¹⁴¹ The prime directive of the educated classes is now “Thou shalt construct thine own identity.”¹⁴² Some conservatives would reduce the legacy of the 60s to unbridled narcissism and self-indulgence. But the Bobos see themselves as motivated, not by “a crass and vulgar selfishness” centered on “narrow self-interest or mindless accumulation,” but by a “higher selfishness,” oriented towards spiritual fulfillment, emotional enrichment, and experiential diversity.¹⁴³

While these characterizations may carry a tinge of the sardonic, they are a far cry from Himmelfarb’s or Kimball’s tones and despair and indignation. Where *Bobos in Paradise* becomes a conservative claim of cultural oppression lies, not in Brooks’s largely laudatory general characterizations,

¹³⁸ David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: the New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pg. 10.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 22.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 17.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 226.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pg. 34.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pg. 134.

but in the entertaining minutiae of his casual observations, which ironically eviscerate the substance of the general characterizations. Though Brooks' stated position is that bohemia and the bourgeoisie have co-opted one another in equal measure,¹⁴⁴ it is the bohemian values that loom largest in the official, and therefore superficial, text of Bobos attitudes and the bourgeois values that lurk underneath the surface as the unspoken yet all-important subtext that reveals the bohemian façade as just that.

The original bohemians identified with social outcasts and the poor, whom they upheld as victims of the bourgeois order.¹⁴⁵ And in this spirit, the Bobos adhere to a policy of "one-downmanship" in order to signal that they disdain social hierarchy as an irrelevant artifice. The basic formula for social status in the Bobo world is net worth multiplied by antimaterialistic attitudes: "to be treated well in this world, not only do you have to show some income results; you have to perform a series of feints to show how little your worldly success means to you."¹⁴⁶ This is why the Bobos are drawn toward "socially approved acts of antistatus deviance," that mock "your own success in a manner that simultaneously displays your accomplishments and your ironic distance from them."¹⁴⁷ To this end, a Bobo might respond to a question about where he went to school with "Harvard?," pronouncing his answer as though to suggest that the questioner might never have heard of America's most famous university.¹⁴⁸ The Bobo understands full well that his interlocutor has heard of Harvard, but he must remove any suggestion that his ego has become invested in its prestige. He wishes to be esteemed, not for his admission to Harvard, but for his indifference to his admission to Harvard.

Brooks explains that this policy of one-downmanship is assisted by a "code of financial correctness" that stipulates that wealth be converted into spiritual and intellectual uplift.¹⁴⁹ So consumption patterns must always be defensible as satisfying a need rather than a mere want: "Spending on conspicuous display is evil, but it's egalitarian to spend money on parts of the house that would previously have been used by servants."¹⁵⁰ While "[o]nly a shallow person would spend hundreds of dollars on caviar," a "deep person would gladly shell out that much for top-of-the-line mulch." Spending \$65,000 on a vintage Corvette is vulgar, but spending that much on a Range Rover with plenty of storage space is acceptable, because it can be classified as a tool. Bobos draw their self-esteem from their

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pg. 43.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pg. 68.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., pg. 50.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., pg. 50.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., pg. 51.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pg. 85.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 89.

activities, not possession as such, and so are drawn to possessions that symbolize activity. Consumer products must signify, not raw wealth, but rather the realization of their highest ideals.

With such observations in mind, one begins to question whether Brooks truly believes that culture and counter-culture have co-opted each other in equal measure. For his concrete illustrations of this proposition seem designed to suggest that it is the counter-culture that has been co-opted by capitalism, that Bobo anti-materialism is only a thin veil for a novel kind of status consciousness that is simply ashamed to recognize itself as such. The Bobos' counter-cultural proclivities are merely the excuses which this new identity makes for itself, just a series of feints without any deep meaning. Brooks's professed admiration for the success of the Bobos' conciliatory synthesis seems like thinly-veiled flattery that is in fact intended to be recognized as such. It is itself a form of Bobo irony, homage that it is extended with one hand and then retracted by the other.

Brooks's various forays into the subtleties of Bobo sensibilities seem consistently calibrated to highlight the paradox that their "code of expressive individualism" is indeed a *code*. For Bobo behaviors and attitudes are typecast and predictable almost to the point of absurdity. The heretofore opposed cultures of bohemia and the bourgeoisie may now have become fused. But this, we are told, is through the "squads of biscotti-nibbling Bobos" that can be spotted in "Latte towns" like Wayne, Pennsylvania.¹⁵¹ These "squads" merely reflect the highly codified nature of Bobo individualism, which can never deliver on the psychological depth it advertises. For if one asks Wayne's Great Harvest Bread Company to "slice the bread in the store, they look at you compassionately as one who has not yet risen to the higher realm of bread consciousness."¹⁵² The Bobos aspire to a higher consciousness, but the meaning of that ideal always comes down to various, often subtle forms of social signaling. While the Bobos ostensibly embrace the counter-culture, close inspection reveals that they have unselfconsciously discarded what was once thought to be its essential substance. For the Bobos' innovation, self-expansion, and personal growth transpire along lines that are in their own way no less narrowly delineated and socially prescribed than were the lives of the old WASP aristocracy that they toppled. The "ideal Latte Town," Brooks tells us, "has a Swedish-style government, German-style pedestrian malls, Victorian houses, Native American crafts, Italian coffee, Berkeley human rights groups, and Beverly Hills income levels."¹⁵³ In short, the Bobos' expressive individualism has proven compatible with achieving a remarkable degree of social consensus on the nature of the good life.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pgs. 61-62.

¹⁵² Ibid., pg. 57.

¹⁵³ Ibid., pg. 104.

The same basic of contradiction recurs in every sphere of Bobo endeavor. Many conservatives worry that “the forces of Anything Goes are sweeping through American culture.” But Brooks believes that this oversimplifies, at least as regards the Bobos. The latter are indeed “far more relaxed about things like posture and proper attire.” But they are “far more restrictive about anger, spitting, and smoking.” They do not attempt to instill their children with moral discipline in any traditional sense, but their preoccupation with their children’s psychic development and career success provides a substitute for that discipline.¹⁵⁴ They are not beholden to any traditional Protestant code. Yet they have “constructed their own ethos that creates a similar and perhaps even more rigorous system of restraints.” In their fixation on physical health and activities like jogging and cycling, Bobos “have reduced even leisure time to a form of self-discipline.”¹⁵⁵ The traditional moralist restrains pleasure in the name of duty, but the Bobos are reconcilers who “strive to blur their duties with pleasure.”¹⁵⁶ And the effect is to transform many spheres of heretofore unmonitored activity into the objects of social surveillance. Bobos engaged in pastimes like skiing or tennis “are constantly evaluating each other to see who is serious and who is not,” and “if you went out onto some field or trail or court and acted happy and goofy, you’d be regarded some someone who is insulting the whole discipline.”¹⁵⁷ While Bobos are generally nonjudgmental in their articulated worldviews—embracing what Charles Murray calls a “code of ecumenical niceness”¹⁵⁸—they can become judgmental where judgmentalism seems least called for.

Whereas the old WASPS “liked refined manners that demonstrated self-mastery,” the Bobos prefer “loose manners that demonstrate honesty.” The WASPS would make a performance of entertaining their guests and let servants prepare dinner out of sight, but the Bobos “invite their guests backstage to the kitchen and given them some veggies to chop.”¹⁵⁹ Bobo “looseness,” then, is no less highly ritualized than WASP self-mastery, no less a matter of conveying the right social queues to the right people at the right time. Eschewing ostentation, the Bobos are attracted to “the perfectionism of small things” and will to this end occupy entire evenings scouring hardware catalogues for the “world’s finest pullout spray head.” But the idea here is to show “that you have so much brainpower to spare, you can even be thoughtful about your water flow.”¹⁶⁰ An ostensibly bohemian concern with pre-social, purely sensuous pleasure that returns us to our animal nature is on closer inspection revealed as an oblique form

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 197.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 138.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 203.

¹⁵⁷ Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, pg. 212.

¹⁵⁸ Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012), pg. 289.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., pg. 83.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pg. 91.

of social status-assertion for which the Bobos' Romantic naturalness is an expedient. What purports to be the natural self-love of Rousseau's savage turns out to be the artificial, other-directed pride of the civilized man. In each and every case, the Bobos can offer no more than a simulacrum of the genuine article. The Bobos may scoff at the unreflective notions of propriety we associate with an earlier, more conservative America. But they are beholden to their own such notions, which are not the less socially coercive for being unspoken and unacknowledged.

These contradictions all follow logically from Brooks's basic premise that the "social revolution of the late sixties was not a miracle or a natural disaster, the way it is sometimes treated by writers of the left and right," but rather a natural consequence of changes in the culture of upscale America that were already in the works.¹⁶¹ Impeded by conventional notions of success, the rising members of the privileged classes engaged, "not only [in] a political effort to dislodge the establishment from the seats of power," but also in a cultural effort "to destroy whatever prestige still attached to the WASP lifestyle and the WASP moral code," in order to make room for a new social order celebrating spiritual and intellectual ideals.¹⁶² If the most common left and right assessments of the 60s revolution are both inaccurate, this is because that generation revolted not as individuals—who might be described as either free-spirited or narcissistically self-indulgent according to one's perspective—but as a distinct social *class* with distinct class interests.

The Bobos' expressive individualism is not only a code but moreover the code of a dominant class to which others have been forced to adapt:

Today, America once again has a dominant class that defines the parameters of respectable opinion and taste—a class that determines conventional wisdom, that promulgates a code of good manners, that establishes a pecking order to give shape to society, that excludes those who violate its codes, that transmits its moral and etiquette codes down to its children, that imposes social discipline on the rest of society so as to improve the 'quality of life,' to use the contemporary phrase.¹⁶³

Where the Left sees raw courage or idealism and the Right sees raw nihilism or irascibility, Brooks discerns a slowly evolved cultural sensibility, an intricate blend of continuity and discontinuity with the old ways. The radicals of the 1960s celebrated expressive individualism, but this was a culturally-mediated individualism that never truly overcame its history. This is why Brooks goes out of his way to illustrate how the vices of the WASP *ancien regime* are always being recapitulated in the Bobo dispensation in some fashion or other. The Bobos are unlikely to actually use their expensive, professional-grade outdoor gear

¹⁶¹ Ibid., pg. 31.

¹⁶² Ibid., pgs. 32 –33.

¹⁶³ Ibid., pg. 46.

for the strenuous tasks for which they were designed and would justify their price tags. But “just as in the age of gentility hypocrisy was vice paying homage to virtue, so today among the Bobos rugged gear is comfort paying homage to adventure.”¹⁶⁴ The Bobo ethos seems marked by a refreshing self-awareness and sociological objectivity that were conspicuously absent in WASP country-clubs. But what is refreshing when contrasted with old-fashioned stuffiness becomes exasperating when contrasted with the Bobos’ own professed ideals, which they never really deliver on.

If the myriad hypocrisies don’t really tarnish Brooks’ overall assessment of the Bobos, whose confused synthesis of virtues he considers palatable, this is because he is in the end *writing as a conservative*. Resigned to the limits of human nature, he recognizes that Bobo shallowness is not the worst thing to be wrought from the crooked timber of humanity. Indeed, the shallowness is merely the byproduct of the Bobo’s visceral conservatism. If many conservatives’ assessments of the 60s’ legacy are unfairly harsh, this is because they fail to appreciate the ways in which its heirs, the Bobos, embody some version of traditional values they cherish. After all, the Bobos “prefer a moral style that doesn’t shake things up, but protects the status quo where it is good, and gently tries to forgive and reform the things that are not so good.”¹⁶⁵ Bobo idealism is indeed halfhearted, but this is because the Bobos have become conservative in the Burkean sense. They are foremost concerned, not with challenging authority in the name of any all-encompassing ideals but with establishing “intimate authority,” with “setting up patterns, instilling habits, and creating contexts so that people are most likely to exercise individual responsibility.” Intimate authority is “authority as biology, with all the members of the ecosystem exerting a gradual and subtle pressure on the others so the whole network can thrive.”¹⁶⁶ Many Bobos would vehemently resist being labeled conservatives, but “often the ones in the hemp clogs and ponytails are the most temperamentally conservative of all.” Indeed, “[i]f you go to places like Berkeley and Burlington, you see that this kind of conservatism can emerge directly out of liberalism.”¹⁶⁷ This is the real message that Brooks hopes to send liberals. His purpose is to subdue liberalism by *exposing its subterranean conservatism*, which liberals are privileged to indulge surreptitiously.

Burke remarked that “[s]eldom have two ages the same fashion in their pretexts and the same modes of mischief.” For the spirit of vice “transmigrates” and “far from losing its principle of life by the change of its appearance, it is renovated in its new organ with the fresh vigour of a juvenile activity.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., pg. 90.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pg. 250.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., pgs. 265-66.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., pg. 268.

¹⁶⁸ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O’ Brien (Penguin Books, 1968), pg. 248

And the upshot of Brooks's observations is that this holds true of conservatism too, which has received "fresh vigour" from liberalism itself, the new appearance assumed by conservatism. Liberals' official ideals may not implicate what Jost et. al. describes as "needs for order, structure, closure." But these needs necessarily circumscribe the official ideals' concrete application and meaning. The adversarial attitudes of the 60s radicals may live on in the ironic detachment of the Bobos. But being ironic even with respect to itself, that detachment is now safely embedded within an essentially conservative ethos that circumscribes the Bobos' actual conduct and attitudes more thoroughly than it circumscribes their self-image, which Brooks seems to regard as a harmless indulgence. The rising 60s generation detested the old WASP elites for "what was *perceived* to be their conformity, their formality, their traditionalism, their carefully defined gender roles, their ancestor worship, their privilege, their unabashed elitism, their unreflective lives, their self-satisfaction, their reticence, their contented affluence, their coldness."¹⁶⁹ But the Bobo order would give rise to new variants of these old vices, to new forms of self-satisfaction and conformity, new forms of unreflective common sense. The coldness of the WASP order has disappeared, but it resurfaces in the unacknowledged judgmentalism that obtrudes itself on the tennis court of all places. Unabashed elitism has only been replaced by abashed elitism, and formality has only been replaced by formalized informality. However unappealing and unfounded the overt social snobbery of the WASPS may have been, it at least had the virtue of being undisguised. Bobo pseudo-honesty has its virtues as well, but these always fall well short of what gets advertised

7. Concluding Remarks and Adumbrations: Conservative Conscientization?

Bobos in Paradise is a far cry from *Liberal Fascism*. Whereas Goldberg excoriates liberals for their crypto-fascism, Brooks credits them for their crypto-conservatism. Whereas Goldberg accuses them of seeking to destroy intimate authority in the name of totalitarian centralization, Brooks judges that they have renounced all overarching ideals in the name of precisely that kind of authority. But while antipodal in their theoretical outlooks, the two narratives both partake of the same underlying spirit of conservative claims of cultural oppression. For both seek to disabuse liberalism, not of its ideas, but of its basic self-understanding. In both cases as in all the others, it is the conservative who stands outside of liberalism in order to discern an unreflective social ethos where liberals see only emancipated individualism. All these "convoluted stories" are liberating to conservatives because all subdue liberalism in this manner. Whatever the story in question, its purpose is to upend the asymmetries through which liberals announce

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., pg. 33.

their moral and intellectual superiority, to expose the truth being concealed by liberal projections and thereby attack a socially entrenched dualism that assigns reflective intelligence, individuation, egalitarianism, and tolerance to liberals and their opposites to conservatives.

That is why conservatives can in their less theoretical moods casually rotate between suggesting that liberals are totalitarians hell bent on social control and portraying them as vain and effete latte drinkers absorbed in idealistic daydreaming. *How and why* the oppressive dualisms from which conservatives suffer are distorted is of secondary importance. And so any narrative which promises to expose that distortion will resonate with them and become incorporated into their total worldview—in some fashion or other woven into that eclectic, multi-layered, and ever-evolving web of tropes that we have come to know as conservative claims of cultural oppression. Convoluting these stories may be, but what liberals see as arbitrary conceptual contortions is for conservatives a direct reflection of liberalism's underlying mendacity, which must be exposed by any means necessary.

The liberal retort is that there *is* indeed a human constant that creates an underlying symmetry between liberals and conservatives. But this simply consists in the fact that humans being human will always be susceptible to all manner of egoism, dogmatism, ambition, hypocrisy, zealotry, blindness, pretension, vanity, and any other vice one cares to think of. That liberals can succumb to these is nothing they have ever denied. In a nation of over three-hundred million people, it is no great feat to expose ample levels of human folly anywhere one cares to look, and across the entire political spectrum. But this is exactly why the claimants' efforts to "expose" these vices are disingenuous. For these vices are simply the ineluctable backdrop of politics and social life, just part of the world as we know it. And conservatives attempt to illegitimately elevate this ubiquitous backdrop of all-too-humanness into a self-subsisting political discourse, to transform a set of banalities into a set of grand historical narratives, parading what is only a series of well-orchestrated ad hominem attacks as novel philosophical insight.

Conservatives allege that liberals are too smug, dogmatic, or haughty to engage them in reasoned and respectful deliberation. But why should their impressions here be credited given their eagerness to reduce liberal argument to the expression of parochial cultural predilections, to mere "tastes and habits" as Codevilla says? For it seems that this reductionism has already closed off the possibility of reasoned deliberation. Conservatives will defend their ad hominem onslaughts as defensive measures, necessary correctives to the undeserved cultural preeminence of liberal sensibilities. But their characterizations of these sensibilities consist in are vague, impressionistic, and ultimately unfalsifiable. What can they say to those who simply do not recognize the "obsession with organic order" that Goldberg attributes to the liberal fascist mind, or to those who do not feel that liberal rhetoric is "sanctimonious and deadly, deadly

serious,” as Anderson claims? What is their response to those who insist that their criticisms of Walmart have nothing to do with the “masses making messes” and everything to do with Walmart’s anti-union stance? How can they impeach the self-reporting of liberals who deny that their motivations are religious in nature, or who maintain that their commitment to artistic freedom or consumer rights is something other than aristocratic snobbery in disguise? How can conservatives maintain that the “new class” of liberal elites entertains some ingrained ideological aversion to the traditional nuclear family, when so many of its members are involved in such families themselves? The list of counter-arguments available to liberals is as endless as it is obvious.

The comic aspect of *Bobos in Paradise* immunizes it from any direct intellectual confrontation. But is it not in this regard a microcosm for conservative claims of cultural oppression and their penchant for strategically deployed innuendo that can never be vindicated by substantive argument? Conservatives would characterize liberalism as a surreptitiously parochial creed, a lifestyle preference of sorts. But there is no serious argument about how this could be. Rather than explaining just how liberalism is parochial vis-à-vis conservatism in the way that one religion is parochial vis-à-vis another, they drown the intellectual stakes in a posture of seen-it-all-before exasperation whose actual theoretical content is always elusive. Liberalism may be parochial in the anthropological sense that it can be correlated with certain kinds of backgrounds, socializations, and cultural proclivities, which is what Brooks succeeds in highlighting. But this does not distinguish liberalism from any other creed, and nor does it establish that liberalism is parochial in some more philosophically robust sense that should concern us.

To the extent the nefariousness imputed to liberals is not suspiciously convoluted and downright unfalsifiable, it seems reducible to tautologies devoid of intellectual content. Conservatives accuse that the liberal elites “think they know better than you.” But to the extent we believe our views to be the correct ones, we must as a logical corollary posit the mistakenness of other, incompatible views. And to the degree we believe these to be mistaken, there is indeed a sense in which we believe that we “know better” than those who hold them. But since when has the law of non-contradiction become elitist? Liberals believe they possess an insight that conservatives lack, just as conservatives believe the opposite. Such is merely the corollary of their believing the things they do. The sins of liberalism, then, would seem to consist in nothing beyond liberals’ failure to be conservative, and this is to beg a very big question. The issue is not, following Sowell, whether the anointed seek to pre-empt the decisions of others, because this is the nature of politics, but whether they are rationally justified in doing so. And this question is not answered by impressionistic assessments of the zeal or single-mindedness with which the anointed pursue their ends.

Sowell and other conservatives insist that liberal policy preferences are epiphenomena of liberal self-righteousness. But reducing a political ideology to the psychological satisfactions which it may afford its followers is an ever-present rhetorical possibility. These satisfactions do indeed exist. But egos become invested in ideas across the entire political spectrum. Such investments are readily apparent in our intellectual antagonists, but often invisible in our own case. And this is exactly what Sowell cannot see. He writes:

If you happen to believe in free markets, judicial restraint, traditional values and other features of the tragic vision [of conservatives], then you are just someone who believes in free markets, judicial restraint and traditional values. There is no personal exaltation inherent in those beliefs. But to be for “social justice” and “saving the environment” or to be “anti-war” is more than just a set of hypotheses about empirical facts. This vision puts you on a higher moral plane as someone concerned and compassionate, someone who is for peace in the world, a defender of the downtrodden, and someone who wants to preserve the beauty of nature and save the planet from being polluted by others less caring.¹⁷⁰

Because the vision of the anointed is a vision of themselves as well as a vision of the world, when they are defending that vision they are not simply defending a set of hypotheses about external events, they are in a sense defending their souls—and the zeal and even ruthlessness with which they may defend their visions are not surprising under these circumstances. But for people with opposite views, who may for example believe that most things work out better if left to such systematic processes as free markets, families, and traditional values, these are just a set of hypotheses about external events, rather than badges of moral superiority, so there is no such huge personal ego stakes in whether or not those hypotheses are confirmed by empirical evidence. Obviously, everyone would prefer to be proved right rather than proved wrong, but the point here is that there are no such comparable ego stakes involved among believers in the tragic vision.¹⁷¹

But this conclusion is foreordained by the way in which Sowell has framed the motivations of conservatives, which liberals would surely dispute. Sowell would dismiss the anointed’s solicitude for criminals and other social outcasts as a gambit through to which to achieve moral and cognitive distinction. But one could as easily argue that social conservatives inveigh against criminality out of a collective self-righteousness of the law-abiding, upon which their “set of hypotheses about external events” is epiphenomenal. Those who oppose “judicial restraint” may have their egos invested in their ability to discover some higher moral or philosophical meaning in the penumbras and emanations of enumerated constitutional protections. But those who urge “judicial restraint” may have their own egos invested in their loyalty to what they understand to be some special dispensation handed down to them for safekeeping by a founding generation of titans. The preening of liberals may be more individuated, and so more noticeable, than the preening of conservatives. But this distinction does not save Sowell’s argument.

¹⁷⁰ Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), pg. 98.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 141-42.

We all approach dialogue and evidence from within a pre-existing frame of reference, which we find psychologically satisfying, and this will sometimes ensue in intellectual arrogance or obtuseness. Such is evident in the fact that, just like the liberal elitism that they bemoan, conservative claimants of cultural oppression are themselves guilty of characterizing the moral and political convictions of ideological targets as epiphenomenal upon forces that bypass awareness. The liberal elites see traditionalist sensibilities as derivative upon unacknowledged bigotry, lack of education or worldliness, or economic frustration. But in parallel fashion, conservatives maintain that liberalism is intelligible only in the context of cultural alienation, moral decadence, hollow verbal dexterousness, or preening self-congratulation. It is simply human nature to attribute deep ideological opposition to irrational factors. To the extent we cannot provide such opposition with a rational construal—which we cannot when the rifts are deep—we may be left with no recourse but to resort to uncharitable *ad hominem*s. Shapiro contends that there is always a “patina of character assassination” in the undertones of liberal arguments. But this is just a reflection of how most human beings think most of the time, and not a special effort on the part of liberals to promote what Shapiro calls a “culture of fear and intimidation.” Conservative claims of cultural oppression caricature an unremarkable feature of human psychology into a special, fanatical zeal that is supposed to somehow obviate the substantive content of liberalism, and these caricatures are cheap rhetorical tactics that will always be available to anyone with nothing else to say.

In short, the liberal rebuttal is that while conservatives imagine themselves to be overthrowing some socially entrenched perception of asymmetry that perpetually redounds to their disadvantage, they have in truth projected that perception onto liberals, who have never sought to arrogate any badges of moral or intellectual superiority and have always acknowledged their human imperfections. To the extent liberals *do* carry any badges of superiority, this is because the perception of asymmetry has been *forced upon them by conservatives themselves*, whose hallucinatory struggle against the vision of the anointed has mired them in ceaseless vitriol and anti-intellectualism. For these are what *elicit* the liberal judgments by which conservatives feel oppressed. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are therefore a self-fulfilling prophesy. To the extent they are true, this is a truth which their propounders have themselves created, thereby generating fuel for further such claims, which seems to be what they ultimately want. And so it appears that it is conservative claims of cultural oppression, not liberalism, that constitute the real lifestyle preference!

This rebuttal is only half the story, however. Tempting though it may be to dismiss conservative claims of cultural oppression as outlandish, the spirit of intellectual charity requires that we suspend any such reactions and instead endeavor to endow them with maximal intelligibility before permitting ourselves the conclusions delineated above. It is easy enough to poke holes in this or that argument or highlight these claims' histrionic tendencies. But our investigation has also shown that the broad questions they raise cannot be dismissed. Some of these are:

- (1) Is liberalism merely a political credo, or is it something that cannot be characterized in purely theoretical terms and is rather grounded in particular understandings of the self? Is liberal discourse pervaded by a certain facile rationalism that impedes a philosophically richer level of description?
- (2) What is the boundary between the religious and the secular? Are the lines somehow blurrier than liberals can recognize? How precisely should we understand the relationship between our ostensibly secular present and our ostensibly more religious past?
- (3) What of the claim that liberals pursue self-serving ends through cultural dominance? Why are liberals so convinced that culture lacks the "tangibility" that attaches to the economic? And might this conviction constitute a kind of ideology that serves to conceal the cultural oppression of some groups?
- (4) Does liberal discourse rely on a set of background narratives—about conservatives and other things—that are always insinuated but never acknowledged in the official framing of liberal argument? Does contemporary liberalism subtly recapitulate forms of hierarchy—like the struggle between "civilization" and "barbarism"—whose cruder, original variants it has long ago rejected?

Conservative claims of cultural oppression provide a powerful unifying context in which to ask these and related questions, because they root these questions in a human immediacy in whose absence philosophical analysis becomes arid and disembodied. Notwithstanding what seems like their facial anti-intellectualism and glibness, conservative claims of cultural oppression embed philosophical inquiry in genuine human anxieties and resentments, and therefore provide a constant reminder of why that inquiry matters. Our question is whether there is a wheat waiting to be separated from the chaff, whether conservative claims of cultural oppression are animated by some intuitive appreciation for a "higher truth" whose significance transcends the ostensible scope of the arguments and of which the arguments are partial, distorted articulations. Might there be some general theory that could broadly explain just why conservatives perceive symmetry where liberals perceive asymmetry, and vice versa? And might this theory highlight moral and political complexities to which most liberals are presently inured?

Liberals will dismiss conservative claims of cultural oppression as nothing more than an enticing victimhood narrative. But this dismissiveness is fully consistent with these claims' truth. After all, what oppressor group in history did not possess the strong sense that the grievances of the oppressed group are somehow contrived? As Kors observes, "most of us sadly develop the capacity to treat the suffering, oppression, or legal inequality of individuals or groups whom we see as obstacles to our own goals or

visions—or even with whom we merely feel little affinity—as abstractions or exaggerations without concrete human immediacy.”¹⁷² And Aleinikoff writes,

Dominant groups may have neither the inclination nor the ability to be fully aware of their domination. Dominant groups generally do not consider themselves to be oppressive, particularly in a society in which tolerance for diversity is valued, and they can provide descriptions of themselves and the disadvantaged that explain inequality as either justified or natural. To the extent that these descriptions effectively absolve dominant groups of responsibility for inequality, and therefore from bearing any of the costs of ameliorating inequality, there is little motivation for the dominant culture to question them.¹⁷³

Liberals hold themselves out as egalitarians who demand only universal autonomy and a more equitably distributed prosperity. But every dominant class in history has sought to legitimate itself through some idealistic framework or another. The feudal lord maintained his dominion for the benefit of the serfs, just as the priest exercised his own special prerogatives for the betterment of penitents. Indeed, the lords and priests need not have even viewed themselves as a dominant class, as they were no less than the peasantry subordinated to the divine order in which everyone was only playing their small role. Might liberals be engaged a similar sleight-of-hand through what they understand as their subordination to their own highest ideals? The thoughtful liberal may be genuinely incapable of conceiving himself as the oppressor he stands accused of being. But he can appreciate that the historical record tells us that *this very inability* may itself express the imperatives of domination, and that oppressed groups can often perceive the exercise of raw power in ways that elude those who actually hold it—who do not notice that to which they are accustomed and from which they benefit.

If conservative claims of cultural oppression are easily dismissed ad hoc contrivances that are either false, tautological, or impressionistic and unfalsifiable, the explanation could lie in liberal domination itself, the Stockholm Syndrome which it has inflicted upon conservatives. Enjoying the power to define reality as such, liberalism may have deprived conservatives of the language and conceptions needed to claim cultural oppression persuasively. If their claims seem like “irritable mental gestures seeking to resemble ideas,” this could be because the hegemony of the liberal culture has *reduced* them to that status, leaving them unable to cogently articulate the nature of the oppression that they feel viscerally. Peter Berger writes:

Conscientization now means the entire transformation of the consciousness of people that would make them understand the political parameters of their existence and the possibilities of changing their situation by political action. Conscientization is a precondition of liberation. People will be

¹⁷²Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), pg. 98.

¹⁷³T. Alexander Aleinikoff, *A Case for Race Consciousness*, 91 Colum. L. Rev. 1060, 1084 (1991).

able to liberate themselves from social and political oppression only if they first liberate themselves from the patterns of thought imposed by their oppressors.¹⁷⁴

The question is whether all the ostensible confusion, contradiction, arbitrariness, and bad faith that liberals discern in conservative claims of cultural oppression can be reinterpreted as part and parcel of a general process of conscientization. With conservatives having internalized liberalism into themselves, their claims of cultural oppression may themselves be contaminated by the very thought patterns from which they seek liberation. And so it is only to be expected that they will often be confused, contradictory, and convoluted, because conservatives are in the process of seeking, without having as yet discovered, a language that is not compromised by liberal categories and assumptions.

Any such explanation would be convoluted indeed. But this convolutedness may be necessitated by basic principles of intellectual charity. Drew Weston writes that the conservative narrative is foremost vitiated by its “failure to explain the *intent* of the villain, who seems to be little more than a Manichean, Ann-Coulteresque liberal who does evil for the sheer pleasure of liberal evildoing. On the face of it, it seems rather unlikely that half of Americans wish ill on their own country.”¹⁷⁵ But it also seems rather unlikely that so many conservatives would devote such energies to claiming cultural oppression were there truly none to be had. If liberal evildoing is no explanation, then neither is unhinged conservative paranoia or conspiracism, which may be the *result* of the very oppression being claimed.

Liberals do not construe the conspiracy-mongering of some black nationalists—like Louis Farrakhan for example—as conclusive proof that ongoing racism does not exist. And this is because the underlying reality of racism can be distinguished from potentially unreasonable characterizations of its nature—for example, as involving genocidal conspiracies to infest inner city communities with AIDS or cocaine. John McWhorter reports a poll in which 29 percent of black college graduates had at one point pegged as true, and 38 percent pegged as possibly true, the claim that “the U.S. government channeled drugs into poor black neighborhoods.”¹⁷⁶ One could read the apparently widespread credence accorded to such outlandishness as a reason to categorically discount all complaints of structural or unconscious racism. But alternatively and more charitably, one could also interpret the magnitude of this irrationality as an indication of the magnitude of African-American’s frustration with persisting racial injustice, which is not illusory just for having been mischaracterized. And likewise, perhaps conservative claimants of

¹⁷⁴ Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pg. 176.

¹⁷⁵ Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), pg. 158-59.

¹⁷⁶ John McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (Harper Perennia, 2001), pg. 31.

cultural oppression are, just like these black poll respondents, *anthropomorphizing* what are very real social forces, operating under the distorting yet understandable resentment that is so often the lot of the oppressed. Most of McWhorter's poll respondents simply lacked the theoretical detachment and sophistication that allows critical race theorists to frame their grievances in more intellectually palatable terms. And likewise, conservatives may simply lack access to a theoretical framework through which to plausibly articulate their irrepressible intuition that they are culturally oppressed and that the ideals of liberalism ultimately redound to their own cause.

John Gray writes that while the segment of the American population that espouses creationism, the right to life, and other fundamentalist causes may not repudiate liberal values explicitly, as do their counterparts elsewhere in the world, they are merely engaged in the "strategic deployment of liberal discourse for fundamentalist ends."¹⁷⁷ But whether that deployment is merely strategic or somehow substantive is a question that liberalism itself calls upon us to take seriously. Do conservative claims of culturally oppression just opportunistically swipe leftist tropes, or would a philosophically refined liberalism have to acknowledge them as in some way falling within the purview of its own ideals and principles? This would not be the first time in history in which what was previously known as liberalism proved to be but a parochial interpretation of ideals that admit of a more universalistic construction.

Codevilla maintains that his two classes—the Ruling Class and the Country Class—have less in common culturally, dislike each other more, and embody ways of life more different than the nineteenth century's Northerners and Southerners—nearly all of whom, as Lincoln reminded them, "prayed to the same God."¹⁷⁸ And our question is indeed about *how to conceptualize difference*, because liberals and conservatives appear to conceptualize the differences that separate them very differently—which is why they seem condemned to always be speaking past one another. The problem of difference is, as Hunter observes, inextricably bound up with the liberal project itself. Liberalism is rooted in the challenge of difference, as an attempt "to provide a humane solution to the difficulties posed by the coexistence of a plurality of dissimilar communities in shared political order." For "[t]ime and again, the ideals and habits of liberalism have been tested by communities, traditions, and interests seeking a reconfiguration of existing understandings of legitimate differences."¹⁷⁹ Conservative claims of cultural oppression are the latest attempt at such reconfiguration. And their plausibility hinges on the human meaning of the differences on whose basis cultural oppression is being claimed. This is a function, not only of the facts,

¹⁷⁷ John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: The New Press, 2000), pg. 14.

¹⁷⁸ Codevilla, *The Ruling Class*, pgs. 6-7.

¹⁷⁹ James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, *Is There A Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*, eds. E.J. Dionne Jr. and Michael Cromartie (Washington D.C.: Brooking Institution Press, 2006), pg. 11.

but of the background understanding of human nature against we conceptualize the significance of the facts. Our central question can be put thus: *On what conception of human difference, and therefore also of the shared human nature which contextualizes that difference, would conservative claims of cultural oppression **not** amount to a set of irritable mental gestures seeking to resemble ideas, but rather intimations of a higher truth?*

Because neither liberals nor conservatives are prepared to take the other's self-descriptions at face value, there is little to be gained by attempting to directly adjudicate their disagreements. Instead of initiating a direct confrontation between conservative claims of cultural oppression and the liberal retort, we must first deduce what could be called these claims' "plausibility-conditions," the particular conception of the human being that would endow them with maximal plausibility. What would one have to assume about human nature, culture, and the workings of the social order for conservative claims of cultural oppression to carry a higher truth? Conversely, what would we have to assume in order to dismiss them as without substance, as liberals are wont to do?

Westen reduces conservative claims of cultural oppression to accusations of liberal evil-doing. But they should be interpreted, not as causal claims about the psychological springs of liberal actors, but as hermeneutic claims about the meaning of liberalism, as attempts to re-describe liberalism in a language that is philosophically richer than is presently accessible within the liberal self-understanding itself. As we saw in Chapter 2, Savage accuses that liberals are constantly jerking conservatives' chains and working them over. And liberals are clearly *not* doing these things in any ordinary sense of these terms. But then it may be these ordinary understandings that are inadequate. The meaning of these concepts is a function of the background philosophical anthropology against which one is operating. And conservative claims of cultural oppression may be implicitly invoking a philosophical anthropology that would justify extending these concepts' semantic boundaries in ways that lend credence to Savage's accusations. In answering these questions, we must approach conservative claims of cultural oppression with the intellectual charitableness of an anthropologist, suspending our prior ontological commitments about what qualifies as a "real" harm, and instead endeavor to articulate a conception of "the real" as it arises within the form of life we are studying.

Honestly appraising conservative claims of cultural oppression requires the liberal to undertake a kind of Cartesian withdrawal, to suspend his strongest intuitions about reality in order to enter the concrete human immediacy of the conservative experience in a way that illuminates the nature of these claims' underlying appeal. Taylor writes:

Interpretation, in the sense relevant to hermeneutics, is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of, an object of study. The object must therefore be a text, or a text-analogue, which in some way is confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory – in one way or another, unclear. The interpretation aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense.”¹⁸⁰

When we ask “how could you possibly believe that?,” we are not asking for a causal story about the necessary or sufficient conditions of a belief, but seeking to identify the sources of the belief’s resonance for its adherents, its “underlying coherence or sense.” We are ultimately seeking a *phenomenological*, not causal, account of conservative claims of cultural oppression. And this is achieved by coming to in some way *experience* the oppression being alleged. A purely “external” approach to conservative claims of cultural oppression—which traces them to, say, the combined influence of economic frustration and Republican machinations—cannot provide this kind of understanding. For the very subject matter of our curiosity—what it *means* to claim cultural oppression—simply disappears from view. This is why we must strive to understand the meaning of conservative claims of cultural oppression from within the lived experience of those who issue them, to understand, not only their causal roots, but also the claims themselves. We want to understand them *from the inside*, to understand *what it is really like* to feel culturally oppressed by liberalism. And this requires that we describe both liberalism and conservatism in a language that is purged of all moralism, *beyond good and evil* as Nietzsche says, a language that does not prejudge the ultimate status of conservatives’ basic sense of grievance.

Whether conservative claims of cultural oppression can be “rescued” from the liberal rebuttal detailed earlier depends on whether we can isolate from out of them a set of intuitions that, suitably reformulated and reassembled, can be reconstructed into a cogent theory of cultural oppression. The question is whether there exists some human constant, some underlying symmetry between liberals and conservatives

- (1) which is irreducible to the ubiquitous, human, all-too-human moral and intellectual vices acknowledged by liberals,
- (2) whose existence liberals somehow deny, either directly and expressly or indirectly and tacitly,
- (3) whose denial has in some fashion engendered the socially entrenched dualisms that aggrieve conservatives
- (4) which owing to either its very nature or the hegemony of the liberal culture has been rendered recalcitrant to clear and cogent exposition, and

¹⁸⁰ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers Volume 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, University Press, 1985) pg. 15.

(5) which owing to that recalcitrance has been articulated in distorted form in the convoluted stories of Right Eclecticism.

Right Eclecticism would be irreducible to any “curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs with the world” because these “beefs” would be united by a structural logic which explains them as natural outgrowths of this state of affairs. This logic may prove exponentially more “convoluted” than any we have thus far surveyed. But while parsimony is other things being equal a virtue, it may be just such a story that is required to explain the convoluted phenomenon of conservative claims of cultural oppression. It is therefore to the development of *my own* convoluted story that the remainder of this work is dedicated. Chapter 4 describes this story in its most general outlines while Chapters 5-9 flesh out the details. Chapter 10 concludes by examining what moral, intellectual, and political lessons may be gathered from it. As the reader will eventually come to recognize, liberals cannot properly understand conservative claims of cultural oppression without first coming to see *themselves* in a new way. And this is the ultimate challenge posed by these claims.

PART TWO

THE THEORY

Chapter Four

A Theory of Cultural Oppression

If conservative claims of cultural oppression take aim, not primarily at liberal ideas, but at the liberal self-understanding, then comprehending those claims requires that we understand the historical and philosophical foundations of that self-understanding. And these foundations, I will be arguing, all involve some version or other of what Charles Taylor calls “subtraction stories.” These are

stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.¹

Subtraction stories are in one form or another familiar to us all. They are the “official” narrative of modernity and secularity, embedded in both our theoretical languages and in popular culture. They present us with the well-known contrast between a benighted past mired in superstition, ignorance, prejudice, and violence, and an enlightened present that finally sees people and things as they are, without the religious and other illusions that formerly compromised our perceptions. The subtraction account of modernity and secularity is what Michael Allen Gillespie calls “the self-congratulatory story that modernity tells about itself and its own origins.”² It is the picture of modernity as “a secular realm in which man replaces God as the center of existence,” as the “realm of individualism, of representation and subjectivity, of exploration and discovery, of freedom, rights, equality, toleration, liberalism, and the nation state.”³ The heroes of subtraction stories are those courageous free-thinkers and non-conformists, like Copernicus and Galileo, who in daring to question the dogmas of their day helped overthrow superstition in the name of reason and hierarchy in the name of freedom and equality. In doing so, they cleared the way for new possibilities of thought and action, for a happier, less hidebound, way of life in which this-worldly fulfillment would no longer be hampered by the oppressive moral rigorisms of a benighted past. Someone like Richard Dawkins is a paradigmatic expounder of subtraction stories, advertising, not only their theoretical content, but their temper and spirit as well.

Most people do not give intense consideration to these topics, of course. But as Taylor observes, persons with little interest in or knowledge of actual history nevertheless find it natural to describe their

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), p22.

² Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (The University of Chicago Press 2008), p. xi.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. x-xi.

world in terms of the historical contrapositions held out by subtraction stories, distinguishing between the “modern” and the “backward,” judging some ideas to be “progressive” and others to be “positively mediaeval.”⁴ The theoretical contents of most subtraction stories are more complicated than this, of course. But their general temper is not, and it is this general temper rather than their details that inform the self-understanding of liberals, who see themselves as further along the process of subtraction than conservatives, who remained significantly mired in the legacy of a benighted past. For it is this judgment that informs the various dualisms by which conservatives feel oppressed. If conservatives refuse to accept liberals and liberalism at “face value” and instead attempt to expose some fundamental contradiction at the heart of liberalism, the ultimate reason is that they reject the subtraction account of modernity—if not theoretically then at some visceral level that silently informs their judgments. This, I shall be arguing here and in subsequent chapters, is the conceptual core of conservative claims of cultural oppression. Though this starting point is rarely thematized, it is what explains a wide gamut of facially unrelated grievances, endowing what Frank calls a “curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs with the world” with a coherence that would otherwise be overlooked.

In invoking its clear and crisp contrasts between the modern and the pre-modern, and between the secular and the religious, the subtraction account induces us to see the present in a way which *conceals the human constants* that conservatives believe are being denied by liberals. It is an implicit, largely theorized disagreement with the subtraction account that explains why conservatives perceive symmetry where liberals perceive asymmetry and asymmetry where liberals perceive symmetry, why they believe that liberals have projected all their vices onto them, and why they regard liberalism as a way of life and not just a political creed. The subtraction account is not only a historical thesis but also a *lens* through which the meaning of contemporary events is conceptualized. And how we assess conservative claims of cultural oppression is ineluctably a function of whether or not we are employing that lens. Liberals do so and conservatives do not, and this is what explains their apparently unbridgeable differences. Our task, then, is to elaborate what rejecting the subtraction account of modernity and secularity would involve, and then to trace the conceptual relationship between our conclusions here and the discourse of conservative claims of cultural oppression. To put what will be a very complicated argument in a nutshell, how we assess conservative claims of cultural oppression depends on what it means to be a human agent, which in turn hinges on whether we accept or reject the subtraction account.

⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 301.

1. Modern and Pre-Modern

The pre-modern dispensation which is now understood to have been cast off as a set of “earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge” consisted, not merely in some set of discrete moral, religious or other convictions, but in a broader teleological order that informed the self-understanding of pre-modern societies and their denizens. Taylor explains:

“Fulfillment” is a natural term which comes often to our lips in this connection [in defining the humanly successful life for moderns]. But in the context of the pre-modern identity, to make something of one’s life is to realize in one’s own person a place in the pattern, well, fully, with éclat.

This by no means implies unselfishness. That is to see it in a modern perspective which distorts. It is rather a matter of a wholly different way of conceiving human satisfaction, including the most egoistic. On one side this can be seen as the fulfillment of desires which inhere in me; on the other, it comes from establishing my position in the order of things. Since the order occupies what is, to occupy a place in it firmly, fully, is to live a full life, one might say; to fail to do so is to sink toward the status of a shadow. A limpid everyday image of one kind of satisfaction is the fulfillment of a felt desire for an object, like hunger or thirst; an image for the other would be rather that of approaching a source of light or warmth, for example getting close to a fire.⁵

Conservatives nostalgic for the moral confidences of an earlier era will sometimes reduce the content of pre-modern teleologies to the prohibitions which they presumably levelled against the excesses of individual egoism. But this is to understate their significance and to overlook their comprehensiveness. Constituting the total background against which human beings made sense of their most basic aspirations, the teleologies informed the meaning of egoism no less than the meaning of altruism. And this was because they informed the very meaning of the self. The pre-modern world was a world in which, to invert the existentialist motto, essence precedes existence, in which one’s power to define the meaning of one’s life is ineluctably shaped by an objective order of things, the background against which one made sense of oneself as an agent. Living a full life meant recognizing one’s proper position within this order, which in turn meant acknowledging one’s dependence on it—that the success of one’s life was a function of whether one instantiated that order in one’s own actions. This pre-modern “order of things” could be rejected rather than embraced. Hence the possibility of sin or dishonor. But it could not be disregarded, because one was then defined by sin or dishonor.

This pre-modern sensibility is why the mature, religiously awakened St. Augustine could conclude that “the true good of every created thing is always to cleave fast lest, in turning away from thee [God], it lose the light it had received in being turned by thee, and so relapse into a life like that of the dark abyss.”⁶ Though the younger Augustine had disregarded God and his commands, this *distance from God* came to

⁵ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers Volume 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge 1985), p.259.

⁶ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Albert C. Outler (Dover 2002), pg. 270.

be understood as having constituted an ever-present reality for his consciousness, which just couldn't be properly understood in the midst of his youthful dissoluteness. If Augustine could not recognize his sin, this was precisely because he was *living* it, caught in it. Being mired in a dark abyss—having sunk toward “the status of a shadow” as Taylor says—he could not access the light which would illuminate the true character of his predicament, his dependence on an order not of his own making.

While pre-moderns could choose how to conduct themselves against this background order, they could not have imagined what it would mean to choose this background itself—to autonomously determine the broader interpretive scheme through which to make sense of their lives. Operating independently of one's personal predilections, this background could *call upon* one to respond appropriately—in accordance with one's status as lord or peasant, priest or penitent, etc. If pre-moderns did not maintain what we now call a “scientific worldview,” this was because the world they encountered was not reducible to its strictly physical features, and rather consisted in demands that had to be “lived up to.” Even at its most egoistic, pre-modern desire implicated a sense of *beholdenness* to meanings that are not of one's own making, meanings that exist independently of one's tastes and desires, or anyone's tastes and desires, and apart from which one could not act. These meanings were what gave structure to one's agency, existing as supports in whose absence one could no longer “make sense.”

This pre-modern “gestalt” had social as well as individual implications. It was the reason why pre-moderns could not be “liberal.” Taylor observes:

And so realizing one's place in the pattern is bound up with being recognized as having done so, for it is a place in public space. And by the same token, living up to one's place is not just one's own affair; it is everyone's business. For each one of us helps to sustain the order which everyone lives, as essentially public order. Thus the incredible (to us moderns) degree of social control of mores in pre-modern society, and the striking lack of privacy. The wider kin dictated so much of the individual's life pattern, often when and whom he/she married. And the village community exercised an extraordinary surveillance over the lives of its members.⁷

We now believe that our freedom ends only at others' noses. But pre-moderns saw things, and *had* to see things, very differently. That deviant conduct created no tangible harms and transpired out of sight was not dispositive because facially private conduct could count as a transgression, not merely against the sensibilities of other individuals, but against the order of things. Given that all of our places in this order were dependent on its continued sustenance, a transgression against this order was also a transgression against everyone whose being was implicated in it. If pre-modern satisfaction meant something like approaching a source of light or heat, it was also the case that the appropriate satisfactions *sustained that light or heat for others*. To transgress against the mores of the village was to induce a

⁷ Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, pg. 260.

disequilibrium in the order of things, which was to call down the wrath of spirit forces with the power to undermine other people's physical and mental well-being. And so the notion of privacy in our contemporary sense simply had no place.

If we since become more liberal, this is because our sense of self no longer seems so strongly bound up with some broader order. For we understand ourselves as able to *disengage* from that order. The modern self is, observes MacIntyre, defined by its capacity to "step backwards" from any particular point of view.⁸ This is why it understands itself as "liberated from all those outmoded forms of social organization which had imprisoned it simultaneously within a belief in a theistic and teleological world order and within those hierarchical structures which attempt to legitimate themselves as part of such a world order."⁹ How did this liberation become possible?

One important part of the explanation lies in the scientific revolution of the Seventeenth Century, which refuted, not only particular superstitions and misconceptions, but an entire way of looking at the world. It therefore constituted a *cosmological* revolution. The tremendous success of the natural sciences, writes Taylor, was premised on recognizing a distinction between the objective characteristics of things and their merely subjective appearance for us as human agents. The scientific revolution called upon us to look upon our world and ourselves "from the outside," as it were, to conceptualize our experience in what Taylor calls *non-anthropocentric* terms, terms that *do not presuppose the existence of distinctively human capacities and dispositions*.¹⁰ This is why science sought to reduce qualitative distinctions, like those between solids and liquids or between different colors, to quantitative ones, like differences in the speed of molecular motion or in the length of light rays. Unlike their qualitative manifestations in our first-person experience, these quantitatively-described entities could support predictive theories, and so qualified as "objective" within this emerging naturalistic outlook. Thus, spatial dimensions qualified as "primary" qualities because they were understood to exist independently of our distinctive capacities and dispositions. A kilometer is a kilometer irrespective of who or what traverses it. By contrast, color cannot exist apart from something like the human eye, which *translates* light-waves into color. Take a differently constituted eye—of a color-blind person or a non-human animal—and the light waves might be translated very differently. Color is therefore a "secondary quality," which must be "translated back" into non-anthropocentric terms—the length of light-waves—before becoming scientifically cognizable. That secondary qualities like color, smell, and softness are in some sense "real"

⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pg. 126.

⁹ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press 1984), pg. 60.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers Volume 1: Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge, 1985), pg. 46-47.

was hardly denied. But their reality was assigned a special ontological status as a feature of our sensibilities. The experience of color or smell manifests, not the objective nature of things, but things' interactions with our perceptual apparatus as human organisms, which mediates the impact of objective reality on our consciousness and can itself be studied non-anthropocentrically (through brain science).

This new naturalism therefore had implications for the *inner* world of human beings, which could also be divided as between the subjective and the objective. Beyond raising questions about the ontological status of secondary properties, this naturalism also induced a new skepticism toward a wide range of human emotions that cannot be readily translated into non-anthropocentric terms. The emotion of fear appears readily amenable to naturalistic reduction. In fearing for our physical safety, we are responding to a state of affairs in the world that can be scientifically described in terms of causal forces with a potential to impinge on us in specified ways. Fear remains "subjective" inasmuch as it is an element of human experience. But that experience can here be operationalized into propositions about measurable features of the causal forces facing us, can be translated into non-anthropocentric terms. The injury with which an animal threatens us is a matter of the situation's measurable features, not subjective interpretation.

But Taylor observes that there are other emotions, indeed the distinctively human emotions, like pride and shame, which seem to resist non-anthropocentric translation.¹¹ To feel shame is to experience the situation as appropriately *calling for shame* by virtue of its objective moral features. This is a function, neither of the laws of cause and effect nor of our personal tastes and predilections, but of a background sense of the higher that informs our understanding of the situation's inherent meaning. This is why the naturalistic outlook disposed many early modern thinkers against pride and shame as anachronistic forms of vainglory, relics of an illusory teleological order that risks blinding us to our "real" interests, interests that do not presuppose any teleological convictions in some order of things. As Albert Hirschman famously observed, the early modern theorists came to view commercial prosperity as an antidote to the rulers' temptation to indulge in the destructive vainglory that would bring their realms to ruin. Just as the people would be ruled by the ruler, so the ruler would be ruled by his *interests*—which had now been set in opposition to mere *passions* like honor, with all their arbitrariness, idiosyncrasy, and unpredictability.¹² In a similar vein, Robert Kagan notes that liberalism could have harnessed individual initiative in the

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 55.

¹² Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pgs. 32, 48-56, 81-87.

service of commercial expansion only by first overcoming an older order grounded in “intangible goods,” such as the glory of the king, the honor of the nobles, or the republican ideals of pagan antiquity.¹³

The dismissal of “intangible goods” as self-deceptive vainglory is part and parcel of the repudiation of anthropocentricity and the rise of the disengaged subject who can “step back” from inherited teleologies. Whereas commercial expansion can be measured non-anthropocentrically, honor and glory presuppose thicker cosmologies, an intuitive sense of things’ significance that must be dismissed as irredeemably subjective within the naturalistic worldview that was beginning to emerge in the Seventeenth Century. The older, pre-modern satisfactions were “intangible” because they could not be translated into non-anthropocentric terms. Pre-moderns understood human satisfaction on analogy with approaching a source of light or warmth. And analogical light or warmth is, within this naturalistic worldview, no more veridical, because no less anthropocentric, than the literal kind. But fulfillment conceived on analogy with hunger or thirst involves no such distortion. By contrast with the pre-modern imperative “to realize in one’s own person a place in the pattern, well, fully, with *éclat*,” modern “fulfillment” does not implicate us in any beliefs that cannot be understood non-anthropocentrically. For it is *understood* that such fulfillment, though stimulated from without, ultimately inheres in us and does not emanate from out of the intrinsic meaning of the situation itself. Fulfillment can be recognized as “real” because, with its ontological status as a feature of our sensibilities alone being a given, it does not arrogate any more reality than it actually has. Fulfillment is a subjective experience, to be sure, but it does not involve projecting that subjectivity upon the world itself, which is what pre-moderns were in the business of doing.

The naturalistic revolution of the Seventeenth Century entailed a revised conception, not only of the cosmos, but also of *true human nature*. Having repudiated any pre-modern understanding of the human agent as defined by a distinctively human attunement to some larger order, the naturalistic revolution was driven to conclude that the difference between human beings and other animals resided in the superior skill with which humans pursue animal-like goals. The erosion of thick ethical concepts at the hands of naturalism had as its corollary the “thinning” of human nature into what could be called a “strategic conception” of agency. Taylor explains:

As long as we think of agents as the subjects of strategic action, then we might be inclined to think that the superiority of persons over animals lies in their ability to envisage a longer time scale, to understand more complex cause-effect relationships, and thus engage in calculations, and the like...What is striking about persons, therefore, is their ability to conceive different possibilities, to

¹³ Robert Kagan, *Liberalism and American Foreign Policy in The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), pg. 159.

calculate how to get them, to choose between them, and thus to plan their lives...The various capacities definitive of a person are understood in terms of the power to plan. Central to this is the power to represent things clearly. We can plan well when we can lay out the possibilities clearly, when we can calculate their value to us in terms of our goals, as well as the probabilities and costs of their attainment. Our choices can then be clear and conscious.”¹⁴

What had previously been understood as the distinctively human capacity to pursue the good through proper attunement to things’ intrinsic significance is from the strategic perspective reinterpreted as a quantitative advantage in the pursuit of purely appetitive desires. Human agents may be exponentially more complex than other animals. But that difference, however great, is one of degree, not kind—just their ability to envision and plan within longer time horizons. This reductionistic spirit led Hobbes to conclude that

...delight and annoyance, although they are not called senses, nevertheless differ only in this: that the sense of an object, as external, comes from the reaction or resistance that is made by an organ; and hence it consists in the endeavor of an organ to push outward; delight, however, consists in the passion made by the action of the object, and is an endeavor inwards.¹⁵

We do not, as a matter of psychological fact, ordinarily experience delight as Hobbes describes it, as consisting in some form of sensory impact. The point, however, is that a fully self-transparent agent would feel compelled to *reinterpret his sense of his situation’s meaning* in these terms. He would have to see it as the interaction of the situation’s strictly physical qualities and his own subjective reaction to those qualities, which combine to in one way or another generate either delight or annoyance. Gone would be the sense of the situation as presenting demands that exist over and above each of these constituent elements.¹⁶ Presupposing as they do a pre-modern cosmology in which the operations of a larger order are at play, such demands must be dismissed as mere projections. However psychologically powerful they might be, they are not “objective.”¹⁷ For objectivity is now a function of human calculation and representation alone, which are what allow us to pursue “delight” effectively.

In adopting this Hobbesian stance, the individual is now understood to have achieved what Taylor calls “liberation through objectification.”¹⁸ Objectification can be liberating because the naturalistic lucidity of the strategic perspective promises to disengage the agent’s consciousness from any vestiges of the pre-modern cosmology that would otherwise have submerged his will in an order not of his own making. In objectifying our situation through the achievement of a non-anthropocentric vantage point,

¹⁴ Ibid., pg.101-104.

¹⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen*, trans. C.T. Wood, ed. B Gert (Indianapolis, IN: Hacket Publishing Company, 1991), pg. 45.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, pg. 55.

¹⁷ Ibid., pg. 106.

¹⁸ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, pg. 5.

we can “overcome a sense of it as what determines for us our paradigm purposes and ends, and can come to see it and function in it as a neutral environment, within which we can effect the purposes which we determine out of ourselves.”¹⁹ To extricate our self-understanding from our pre-theorized, first-person experience of the world, and so understand ourselves as it were “from the outside,” is to redeem ourselves from absorption in a layer of normativity that cannot genuinely carry the kind of significance we are tempted to assign it. In thus extricating ourselves, we penetrate beyond our lived experience to perceive the causal forces in which this experience of significance originates, bringing these forces under our conscious control. Thus, the psychoanalytic patient will be led to reduce his general sense of shame or inadequacy to a complex of “feelings” sparked by specific experience that do not actually carry the kind of significance that would justify his shame. The purpose of this objectification is precisely to undermine the convincingness of his pre-reflective general sense of things, to erode the normative power it would otherwise have by restricting his attention to questions of cause and effect.

The success of science in explaining facilitating control over external nature thus had as its corollary a normative ideal of self-transparency and self-control *within* human beings, a new conception of human *virtue*. Pre-modern understandings of human flourishing having been dispensed with, these were replaced by *the imperative to recognize oneself in strategic terms*, the sine qua non of the new ideals. Hence what Taylor describes as the quintessentially modern ethic “of independence, self-control, self-responsibility... a disengagement which brings control; a stance which requires courage, the refusal of the easy comforts of conformity to authority, of the consolations of an enchanted world, of the surrender to the promptings of the senses.”²⁰ I will dub this the *ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity* for ease of expression. And the courage and self-control which it celebrates are the courage and self-control required to stand in steadfast opposition to all those “pre-modern temptations” that had heretofore suppressed the underlying features of human nature that will once liberated dispose us toward this-worldly human flourishing.

These teleological schemes blinded people not only to the world as it is, but to their own agency powers as well. Someone beholden to shame and glory has, in a sense, compromised his own agency, because these motivations suppress the naturalistic lucidity that would allow him to recognize that only delight and annoyance are at stake and then proceed accordingly. But the ideal of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity promised just this lucidity, promised to liberate us from anachronistic moralisms

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 4.

²⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 559-60.

predicated on teleological conceptions of the world, what Hume called “useless austerities and rigours.”²¹ For by understanding ourselves non-anthropocentrically, we also come to see traditional taboos for what they are—not an eternal order of things but antiquated rules that have outlived their usefulness as natural adaptations to particular life conditions. And this has social implications, because this is what allows the individual privacy that had no place in the pre-modern order. With this order having been declared illusory, it could no longer justify the level of social control that was par for the course in pre-modern societies. Naturalistic disengagement, then, is the *sine qua non* not only of psychological autonomy but also of social freedom. Only by coming to understand ourselves as operating in a neutral environment as strategic agents can we recognize that others are doing the same and that their right to do so is equal to our own. While some conservatives associate the modern order with an unrelenting subjectivism, that subjectivism first emerged in the context of a social ethos, not as an indulgence, but as a *demand* that people began to place on themselves.

2. The Psychological Foundations of Liberalism

This configuration of the relationship between the modern and pre-modern—as the *subtraction* of anthropocentricity—is relevant, not just as intellectual and cultural history, but as an ongoing, albeit largely tacit, feature of our political culture. For it is what informs contemporary liberals’ understanding of their relationship to conservatives, whom they judge as having failed to achieve the psychological liberation of the modern self. This view may not be voiced explicitly. But the basic contraposition between the disengaged, non-anthropocentric lucidity of liberals and the unreflective teleological immersion of conservatives lies in the background of many liberal intuitions.

Steven Smith observes that the harm-principle—the position that the state may only regulate harmful as opposed to merely immoral conduct—has served as “a trusty weapon in the arsenal of liberalism.”²² Though conservative defenders of liberty-restricting legislation have sometimes acceded to the principle’s premises and emphasized the harmful “secondary effects” of facially harmless conduct—e.g., pornography’s contribution to urban blight—these arguments have generally proven ineffectual, and are moreover suspected as disingenuous rationalizations for more moralistic motivations. For this reason, the harm-principle has nearly always yielded liberal prescriptions.

²¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. J.B. Schneewind (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), pg. 79.

²² Steven D. Smith, *Is the Harm Principle Illiberal?*, 51 Am. J. Juris. 1,1 (2006).

But it is far from obvious, Smith argues, why the harm principle should have this “essentially liberal orientation.”²³ Putting aside speculative arguments from secondary effects, the harm-principle could in theory serve a conservative agenda. For much legislation that liberals would veto under the harm-principle as unduly coercive can be defended as a response to the “psychic harm” and “communal harm” which the targeted conduct clearly and uncontroversially causes. After all, “psychic distress is a kind of mental pain” and “is plainly something that people prefer to avoid.” There is thus an obvious sense in which conduct which causes it—like the consumption or dissemination of pornography—is “harmful” and falls within the ambit of the harm-principle irrespective of secondary effects. And the same holds of communal harm: “If people get satisfaction or happiness from living in a particular kind of community, then conduct that subverts that kind of community and thus reduces such happiness inflicts a kind of ‘harm.’”²⁴

Yet liberals will greet such arguments with “peremptory dismissal”²⁵ and “dismissive indignation,”²⁶ convinced that psychic and communal harm “are plainly not the kinds of ‘harm’ that the principle is meant to encompass and hence that can serve to support restrictions on liberty.”²⁷ This dismissive indignation rests on flimsy grounds, however. After all, most people sincerely regard such injuries as genuine harms, and we can all appreciate their logic. Though liberals will dismiss that logic as simple-minded, it fully comports with our everyday understanding of “harm,” which encompasses psychic and communal harm just as much as the purportedly more “tangible” physical and economic harms with which liberals concern themselves. If liberals are nevertheless confident in their peremptory dismissals and dismissive indignation, this is because they have illegitimately “commandeer[ed] a principle that is not inherently liberal, and indeed that may well be illiberal in its intrinsic tendencies, and transformed it into a leading instrument of the liberal cause.”²⁸

The triumph of the harm principle is a merely rhetorical triumph, however. For liberals have by “sleight of hand”²⁹ engaged in “rampant equivocation, trading on more ordinary senses of ‘harm’ for persuasive purposes while importing technical or artificial conceptions of ‘harm’ in order to secure their desired conclusions.”³⁰ They have “rigged” the concept of harm by exploiting its commonsense “subject-

²³ Ibid., pg. 2.

²⁴ Ibid., pgs. 25-26.

²⁵ Ibid., pgs. 14-15.

²⁶

²⁷

²⁸

²⁹ Ibid., pgs. 2-3.

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 3.

oriented”³¹ meaning—which includes psychic and communal harms—in order to establish the harm-principle’s commonsense rhetorical appeal while then qualifying its meaning—reducing harm to strictly physical invasions of others’ autonomy—in the context of specific controversies in order to secure liberal outcomes.³² Liberals are in this regard “like people who insist that an issue should be resolved by democratic vote while working behind the scenes to disenfranchise groups who might be inclined to vote against their cause.”³³ Their professions to the contrary notwithstanding, liberals impose their values on others, because their tendentious conception of harm disguises the “quintessentially illiberal practice of treating some people’s ideas of the good life as less worthy,” concealing from view “how harm principle rhetoric actually works to obfuscate the deeper issues, to conceal real injuries, and to marginalize some conceptions of the good life.”³⁴ Liberalism’s culture of stealth and subterfuge seems once again at work.

However, what Smith characterizes as liberals’ “rigging” or “sleight-of-hand” is far from arbitrary once we assume the modern ethos of disengaged self-control and disengagement. If liberals apply the harm principle selectively, disregarding the everyday “subject-oriented” meaning of harm, this is because that everyday meaning incorporates an anthropocentricity that their “artificial” or “technical” conception of harm excludes. Liberals must decline to recognize the everyday “subject-oriented” understandings of harm on account of that very subjectivity. For those who claim to have been psychically or communally harmed have been harmed only in consequence of their failure to liberate themselves from the teleological hierarchies whose violation inflicted the psychic or communal harm in the first place. Psychic and communal harms may indeed be “real” in the everyday sense of the term. They are an actual feature of human experience. But this is only because those complaining of these harms are mired in pre-modern thought patterns, imagining that “each one sustains the order which everyone lives, as essentially public order,” as Taylor puts it. For psychic and communal harm at bottom consist in the perception that others have failed to satisfactorily position themselves vis-à-vis some teleological order, thereby sinking toward the status of a shadow, and the accompanying apprehension that this threatens to visit the same fate upon others, including oneself. This harm may be eminently “real” as a feature of one’s sensibility, which is what Smith succeeds in highlighting. But it is otherwise from within the non-anthropocentric vantage point from which the harm-principle is being applied. Here, only what can harm a *strategic* agent qualifies as a genuine harm, and this is the unstated premise of liberals’ harm-principle rhetoric.

³¹ Ibid., pgs. 24-25.

³² Ibid., pg. 26.

³³

³⁴ Ibid., pgs. 2-3.

Amy Wax observes that rationalistic liberals are unmoved and unimpressed by social conservatives' "[v]ague premonitions of erosion or unraveling" of the social order, which they dismiss as "an inadequate basis for resisting changes that satisfy immediate needs and urgent desires."³⁵ And the reason is that "vague premonitions of erosion or unraveling" are understood to be symptoms of a lingering pre-modern sensibility, whose requirements cannot be permitted to interfere with liberals' more tangible concerns with assisting modern "fulfillment." This is why Justice Blackmun's dissent in *Bowers v. Hardwick* could argue that homosexuality in and of itself "involves no real interference with the rights of others, for the mere knowledge that other individuals do not adhere to one's value system cannot be a legally cognizable interest."³⁶ For this is how any opposition to homosexuality must be conceptualized within a strategic perspective—as Hobbesian "annoyance" rather than some disequilibrium in the order of things. Thus understood, the desire to regulate others' unobtrusive personal conduct out of concern for the "moral fiber of society" is a disingenuous gambit to arrogate state power in order to more effectively indulge what are merely personal preferences.

What Smith condemns as liberals' "equivocation" is not an arbitrary expedient for arriving at predetermined conclusions, but one expression of the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. Liberals undertake what Smith decries as a sleight-of-hand quite guiltlessly because they understand this as a *corrective* to the sleight-of-hand that conservatives have already perpetrated in their refusal to overcome their anthropocentricity. Those who would "enforce morality" are dismissed as meddlesome moralists rather than recognized as faithful adherents of the harm principle acting out of a common sense conception of harm because they are sloughing off onto others the costs of their own failure to liberate themselves from some variety or another of anachronistic teleological illusion. To the extent liberalism may be said to marginalize some conceptions of the good life, as Smith alleges, this is because those conceptions seem structurally pre-modern, involving a conception of human flourishing that cannot be translated into non-anthropocentric terms. Conservatives are therefore guilty, not merely of some enumerated set of prejudices, but of succumbing to pre-modern temptation. In blurring the subjective and the objective, this surrender compromises their own agency while propelling them to externalize the costs of this heteronomy onto others, which is what is happening when they try to enact their moral feelings into law. And this, liberals cannot abide. Smith likens liberals to individuals who claim to be promoting the democratic vote while working behind the scenes to disenfranchise those who would vote

³⁵ Amy L. Wax, *The Conservative's Dilemma: Traditional Institutions, Social Change, and Same-Sex Marriage*, 42 San Diego L. Rev. 1059, 1085 (2005).

³⁶ *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186, 213 (1986) (Brennan, J., dissenting).

the wrong way. But liberals would take the analogy in another direction and retort that they are merely excluding those who have failed to reach the age of majority—the half-savage relics of past times.

This judgment does indeed go unacknowledged by liberals. But whatever disingenuousness may be discovered in liberal harm-principle rhetoric is intrinsic to what Chapter 2 described as the tension between the foreground and background of a transformative liberalism. Whereas liberalism’s foreground is formally egalitarian and deferential toward ordinary sensibilities—Smith’s everyday conception of harm—the background works to transform these sensibilities in a more modern, more non-anthropocentric direction, in order to inculcate a strategic self-conception. It is to this end that liberalism dispenses its salvos of “dismissive indignation” toward conservative harm-claims, in an effort to socially define these teleologies as just so many sleights of hand. As we observed with Macedo, liberalism has a “hidden curriculum.” And that curriculum may be better hidden from its agents than from its targets. Unlike liberals, conservatives do not take the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity for granted as essential human nature, and this allows them to see the ways it is being enforced as liberals cannot. While conservatives usually lack a properly conceptual comprehension of their afflictions, they cannot but sense some vague “elitism” in the disjunction between foreground and background, between liberals’ vague celebrations of individual difference and the quite specific conception of human virtue to which they are in fact committed. And this disjunction is at the very origin of conservative claims of cultural oppression.

* * *

The same basic contraposition between modern and pre-modern is operative in George Lakoff’s *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. Lakoff argues that liberals have, as heirs to a misbegotten Enlightenment rationalism, misconceived the underlying nature of their disagreements with conservatives. Though these are often cast as point-by-point policy disputes, Lakoff believes that they are better explained as a conflict between opposed systems of moral metaphor which originate in different conceptions of the family that are then projected onto the political sphere, where they provide the basic frames through which seemingly unrelated policy issues are conceptualized and argued. We may in our more philosophical moods conceive of the relationship between citizens and government along the lines of social contract theory, and so see government as the creation of its citizens. But Lakoff believes that our actual practical reasoning about politics proceeds from the opposite premise that citizens are

creations of their government much as children are creations of their parents. This is why our practical political philosophies originate in what are different understandings of ideal family relations.³⁷

Whereas conservatives are animated by a “Strict Father” family morality, liberals embrace a “Nurturant Parent” family morality. Nurturant Parent morality seeks to create a world governed by “bonds of affection, respect, and interdependence” that “encourages people to develop their potential and provides help when necessary” a world in which “those who are helped feel a responsibility to help others and carry out that responsibility.”³⁸ By contrast, conservatives’ Strict Father ethos conceptualizes morality as “the strength—the moral fiber or backbone—to resist evil” and so makes an ideal of moral “uprightness.”³⁹ These opposed conceptions of ideal family relations constitute the foundations for systems of metaphor that crop up in a host of policy disputes—in debates about “family values,” certainly, but also in a wide array of contexts that bear no obvious relationship to the family and its workings. In implicitly conceiving of the nation as a kind of family, liberals and conservatives are both reliant on these metaphorical construals of policy stakes.⁴⁰ These opposed frameworks of metaphor “explain what unifies the collection of liberal and conservative political positions,”⁴¹ endowing these sometimes random-seeming amalgamations with an ideological coherence that could not be gathered from the terms of the official arguments.

Liberals and conservatives claim to stand for many of the same values, including tolerance, freedom, and patriotism, which is why they must see each other as hypocritical to the hilt. But what seems like hypocrisy is in fact the consistent application of the systems of family morality that are always concretizing the actual meaning of grand politico-philosophical abstractions. Thus, if liberals’ celebration of tolerance does not include tolerance for environmental pollution, this is by virtue of their overarching system of metaphorical family values, according to which nature is a metaphorical mother that must be respected.⁴² The apparent contradictions of conservatives can be similarly resolved. If they can love their country while hating their government, this is because the Strict Father model impels them to conceive of themselves as children who, having grown up and imposed proper self-discipline on themselves, are not to be meddled with by a Strict Father whose strictures are no longer needed.⁴³ Conservatives’ embrace of laissez-faire and small government originates, not in ideas about property rights that were

³⁷ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (The University of Chicago Press 2002), pg. 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pg., 215-16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pg., 272.

never ceded to the state in the original social contract, but in their “elaborate mythology” of the “model citizen” who, having worked hard and played by the rules, must be respected by the wider society which he has so greatly benefited.⁴⁴ With conservative businessmen having been elevated to this exalted status, arguments for heightened regulation or taxation can be dismissed out of hand as meddling interference with those most deserving of our admiration.⁴⁵

There is no inconsistency if conservatives suspend their usual hostility toward bloated government when it comes to military spending. Given that the military embodies Strict Father values—“hierarchical authority, self-discipline, building strength, and fighting evils”—it can be publicly subsidized without affront to those values.⁴⁶ Education spending, on the other hand, is wasteful, because educators are mostly nurturers who stand in the way of Strict Father morality.⁴⁷ Conservatives support the freedom to own guns while opposing the freedom to abort a fetus because “[g]uns are seen as the individual’s form of protection in a hostile world,” as “symbolic of the male role as family protector.”⁴⁸ By contrast, abortion symbolizes corrupting parental indulgence, a child’s failure to “learn from her mistakes,” or a woman’s preference for career above motherhood—all affronts to Strict Father morality.⁴⁹ The difference between liberals and conservatives is not that one group is more true to their professed ideals, but that the concrete meaning of these ideals is being determined by the opposed familial metaphors and moralities that are always lying in the background.

Lakoff’s characterization of conservatism as a “Strict Father” morality falls into a longstanding tradition of academic research—much of it summarized by Jost et. al.—that sees conservatism as the political manifestation of an authoritarian personality. Being unusually fearful and anxious about the unknown and untried, conservatives exhibit a higher need for order, closure, and structure, which goes on to express itself in moral and political authoritarianism. For Strict Father morality, writes Lakoff,

Someone who moves off sanctioned paths or out of sanctioned territory is doing more than merely acting immorally. He is rejecting the purposes, the goals, the very mode of life of the society he is in. In doing so, he is calling into question the purposes that govern most people’s everyday lives. Such “deviation” from social norms goes beyond mere immorality. Actions characterized metaphorically as ‘deviant’ threaten the very identity of normal people, calling their most common and therefore most sacred values into question.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Ibid., pg., 170.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pg., 211.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pg., 193.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pg., 232.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pg. 199.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pg., 267-68.

⁵⁰ Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, pgs. 84-85.

The threat of deviation being what it is, Strict Father morality requires us “to constantly be on the lookout for signs of moral decay and erosion and to stop them immediately, because once rot sets in or the foundation crumbles, repair may be impossible, immorality will become rampant, and society will be unable to function in its natural moral way.”⁵¹ Irreducible to specific transgressions and their consequences, immorality has here been conceptualized on analogy with sickness, as a kind of contagion that may easily spread from person to person. There can therefore be an “outbreak” of immorality, the threat of which requires that immoral people be segregated from moral ones, lest the contagion spread. This is, Lakoff believes, “part of the logic behind urban flight, segregated neighborhoods, and strong sentencing guidelines even for nonviolent offenders.”⁵²

But this logic is also the logic of pre-modernity. Contemporary conservatives do not seek to exercise the level of social surveillance and control that was the norm in the pre-modern world. And clearly, many of their values are not pre-modern in their substance. Having emerged with the waning of the old cosmology, the ideal of the industrious “model citizen” is quintessentially modern. Nevertheless, Strict Father morality as characterized by Lakoff appears to recapitulate the pre-modern conviction that individual and communal flourishing depends on upholding some wider order of things, and that this dependency can in turn justify action against those threatening that order. The ostensible concerns of conservatives may be modern, but the deeper *impetus* behind the concerns is, in a way, pre-modern. The goal is not just to uphold certain conduct, but to uphold the order that sustains that conduct. This is why deviation “goes beyond mere immorality,” as Lakoff says.

The teleological hierarchies of pre-moderns had an ever-present religious foundation. But religion for Lakoff is only one outlet through which conservatives can express their commitment to “Moral Order.” And at the heart of that commitment is a belief in differential superiority and inferiority, a framework of thought into which “various ‘bigoted clauses’ specifying who precisely is superior to whom may be inserted.” These might include the “racist clause,” the “anti-Semitic clause,” the “jingoist clause,” the “homophobe clause,” or the “superpatriot clause.” Contemporary conservatives do not necessarily embrace all these historically notorious bigoted clauses. But this just means that their moral hierarchy has open slots available for new bigoted clauses, like survivalism, which symbolizes “the superiority of man over nature.”⁵³ Whatever particular cluster of bigoted clauses happens to be in play, the priority is not human development, as it is for Nurturant Parent morality, but the “Principle of Self-Defense,” the

⁵¹ Ibid., pg. 92.

⁵² Ibid., pg. 93.

⁵³ Ibid., pg. 276-77.

belief that it is our duty to “defend Strict Father morality above all else,” especially against its inveterate opponents in academia and other liberal milieus.⁵⁴ This is why the mythology of the model citizen has as its corollary a demonology, which stigmatizes defenders of the “public good” like environmentalists, consumer advocates, or proponents of affirmative action and government-supported health care. In attempting to constrain the business activities of model citizens, these nurturers threaten the general moral equilibrium on which all depend.⁵⁵

Again, the *content* of these conservative apprehensions is wholly modern. But their *structure* appears pre-modern. Conservatives’ bigoted clauses serve to distinguish between those, like the model citizen, who have realized in their “person a place in the pattern, well, fully, with *éclat*,” and those like the model citizens’ liberal adversaries, who have sunk “toward the status of a shadow.” In failing to uphold “the order which everyone lives,” nurturers threaten the wider society with the same fate, which is why they must be stopped. The model citizen’s various bigoted clauses are simply different means through which these pre-modern categories become instantiated at the expense of the concrete human welfare that is the focus of Nurturant Parent morality.

If Lakoff’s conservatives are quintessential pre-moderns, so his liberals are quintessential moderns. Liberals can occupy themselves with nurturance because nurturance is the corollary of modern “fulfillment.” For nurturing can seem like the obvious thing to do upon having adopted a stance of naturalistic disengagement that recognizes as illusory the “thicker” conceptions of human flourishing to which conservatives remain beholden. Liberal morality appears to follow naturally from the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, which undermines the teleologies that support Strict Father morality. If conservatives do not concern themselves with nurturance—in either themselves or others—this is because they have not internalized this ethos, and so are perennially occupied with defending an illusory order against its illusory assailants, whose humanity must therefore be ignored or, worse, discredited.

This is the heart of Lakoff’s attack on Strict Father morality when he argues that its highest metaphors—moral strength, moral authority, and moral order—“do not keep one in direct touch with human flourishing at the most basic level of experience.”⁵⁶ Having established arbitrary and subjective good versus evil and us versus them dichotomies, Strict Father morality must breed a “divisive culture of exclusion and blame.” Appealing to the worst human instincts, it encourages us to “stereotype, demonize,

⁵⁴ Ibid., pg., 98.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg., 171.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pgs., 382-83.

and punish the Other—just for being Other.”⁵⁷ Caring more “that a person is morally weak (lacking in self-discipline and self-reliance) or violating moral authority (a criminal) than that he is poor, sick, physically weak, or uncared for,” Strict Father morality “gives priority to forms of metaphorical morality...over experiential morality.” In doing so, it loses touch with our common humanity, loses touch with “the nonmetaphorical, literal, directly experienced foundation of all metaphorical moral systems.”⁵⁸ Strict Father morality is no less “experiential” than Nurturant Parent morality in the sense that both are indeed experienced by their respective adherents. But the difference is that *the metaphorical elements of Nurturant Parent morality also admit of a non-anthropocentric interpretation* that accurately tracks the creation of tangible harms and benefits—which is what naturalistic objectification permits us to recognize. By contrast, Strict Father morality by its very nature cannot be purged of its anthropocentric—that is, metaphorical—elements, because its metaphors are by their very nature disconnected from real human flourishing. Conservatives have remained mired in a pre-modern, anthropocentric sensibility, which blinds them to others’ humanity because it blinds them to the human condition as it actually is.

* * *

The subtraction account, says Taylor, tells us “that once religious and metaphysical beliefs fall away, we are left with ordinary human desires and these are the basis of our modern humanism.”⁵⁹ And this is why liberals aim to promote ordinary human desire in disregard of conservatives’ “vague premonitions of erosion or unraveling.” For it is these premonitions and the teleological convictions they betray that threaten nurturance. For nurturance becomes possible only once we recognize fulfillment as fulfillment—the commensurability of all human desire as the pursuit of “delight” and the evasion of “annoyance.” And this cannot be recognized so long as any teleological hierarchies remain intact. Hence the 18th century theoreticians of sympathy who described the phenomenon without reference to any idealistic cognition. Hume, for example, characterizes sympathy as a kind of “contagion.”⁶⁰ And this is because to conceptualize sympathy in more idealistic terms, as reflecting some commitment to the highest good, is to potentially lend support to the moral hierarchies that could potentially undermine sympathy.

Naturalistic disengagement does not automatically transform people into moral saints, of course. But to abandon all teleological hierarchies is also to abandon the *motivation* for presuming differential

⁵⁷ Ibid., pg., 383.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pgs. 382-83.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 253.

⁶⁰

superiority and inferiority. For the basic framework that gives this ranking its sense has been repudiated. Ordinary human desires can involve their own self-centeredness. But this is merely self-nurturance, and not the kind of aggressive egoism that might be spurred on by apprehensions about sinking toward the status of a shadow. The basic intuition is captured by Steven Pinker when he argues that “a philosophy of living based on ‘Not Everyone, just me!’ falls apart as soon as one sees oneself from an objective standpoint as a person just like others. It is like insisting that ‘here,’ the place one happens to be occupying at the moment is a special place in the universe.”⁶¹ In other words, naturalism reveals that egoism cannot be justified by any facts about the universe. “Nurturance” is not logically necessitated by naturalism, of course, any more than any “ought” can be necessitated by any “is.” But nurturance is, in a sense, evidence that one has internalized the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity that is the flipside of naturalism, evidence that one has transcended the pre-modern temptations that would blind one to the interchangeability of all “heres.”

Hence Taylor’s observation that post-modernists’ commitment to human rights is unmotivated by any traditional moral realism, and is instead “plainly powered by a sense of dignity, the sense of a demand laid on us by our very lucidity.”⁶² This sense that lucidity as such lays a claim on us is the reason why liberals are not worried by the specter of relativism, as are conservatives. George Nash observes that whereas post-war conservatives believed that totalitarianism had originated in “corrosive, skeptical relativism,” liberals traced it to the “militant reaffirmation of traditional ‘absolutes.’”⁶³ And this disagreement is explained by liberals’ faith in the *moral power of naturalism*, their faith that non-anthropocentricity as such offers a moral substitute for whatever “absolutes” it corrodes, that this corrosion is in and of itself the wellspring of new moral meanings, because naturalistic lucidity suffices to preempt the teleological illusions upon which the most egregious moral transgressions are usually premised. It is these assumptions, and not mere sentimentalism, that guides liberals’ faith in the essential goodness of liberated human nature.

This faith in the moral power of naturalism informs Martha Nussbaum’s opposition to shame and disgust as bases for social policy. She writes:

What inspires disgust is typically the male thought of the male homosexual, imagined as anally penetrable. The idea of semen and feces mixing together inside the body of a male is one of the most disgusting ideas imaginable—to males, for whom the idea of nonpenetrability is a sacred boundary against stickiness, ooze, and death. The presence of a homosexual male in the neighborhood inspires the thought that one might oneself lose one’s clean safeness, become the receptacle for those animal products. Thus disgust is ultimately disgust at one’s own imagined

⁶¹ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate* (New York: Viking Press, 2002), pg. 187.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pg. 695.

⁶³ 61

penetrability and oozyiness, and this is why the male homosexual is both regarded with disgust and viewed with fear as a predator who might make everyone else disgusting.⁶⁴

While all emotions carry the potential to distort our understanding of reality, Nussbaum argues that disgust is distorting in its essence.⁶⁵ For moralized disgust involves externalizing our primal sense of animal vulnerability onto social outsiders, turning them into embodiments of the human frailty we would like to deny in ourselves. Whereas anger can in principle track social danger in a reliable way, disgust is intrinsically unreasonable, embodying “magical ideas of contamination, and impossible aspirations to purity, immortality, and non-animality, that are just not in line with human life as we know it.”⁶⁶ The attempt to control or contain what have been deemed contaminated objects is a form of magical, atavistic thinking and feeling, deployed to sustain an unrealistic sense of control over life’s contingencies. Disgust is inherently distortive because it represents “an aspiration to be a kind of being that one is not.”⁶⁷

The same applies to shame. Whereas guilt focuses on the wrongness of particular actions or desires, and can therefore track real harm, shame extends to the entirety of the agent’s being, judging him inadequate in the light of some unrealistic ideal of human perfection and omnipotence.⁶⁸ To shame is to externalize one’s own sense of inadequacy before such an ideal in order to identify oneself as an uncorrupted “normal” who is not subject to shame. The flipside of shame is not self-respect but normalcy, and normalcy functions “like a surrogate womb, blotting out intrusive stimuli from the world of difference,” creating a “type of surrogate bliss” that satisfies an “infantile wish for control and invulnerability.”⁶⁹ Though shame expresses itself through particular social norms, it presupposes a sense of inadequacy that precedes these and so, just like disgust, implicitly posits an ideal that is just out of line with life as we know it.⁷⁰

In seeking to expel the language of shame and disgust from the public sphere, Nussbaum is urging a certain kind of human self-recognition, which she understands to be the “psychological foundations of liberalism.” These foundations, she writes, which would be fully realized in

a society that acknowledges its own humanity, and neither hides us from it nor it from us; a society of citizens who admit they are needy and vulnerable, and who discard the grandiose demands for

⁶⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2004), pg. 113.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 74.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 207.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 219.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 185.

omnipotence and completeness that have been at the heart of so much human misery, both public and private.⁷¹

Here too is an implicit contraposition between the naturalistic lucidity of the strategic agent and the teleological illusion of those who have succumbed to pre-modern temptation, which Nussbaum like other liberals believes is at the root of most avoidable human misery. The psychological foundations of liberalism are not good intentions, but a certain kind of *discipline* imposed on our emotional lives, a discipline that subdues symbolic or ideational elements that do not reliably track the kinds of harms that are cognized from a non-anthropocentric standpoint. The psychological foundations are therefore the self-discipline to transcend anthropocentricity, to transcend the all-too-human need to embed oneself within an order that would lift one above mere animality and infuse one with a greater fullness of being. Citizens having achieved this transcendence are prepared to expose themselves psychologically to the reality of their animal vulnerability by disavowing the culturally sustained hierarchies of the pure and impure, or the normal and the abnormal, on which the denial of vulnerability depends. Having eschewed these hierarchies, they are prepared to see society naturalistically, as an agglomeration of vulnerable organisms just making their way about in the world.

It is this stance of naturalistic disengagement that allows us to understand disgust non-anthropocentrically—for example, as an evolved mechanism that might have once served as a reliable indicator of bacteria but now functions as a highly unreliable indicator of genuine threats to our welfare. Nussbaum's liberal citizens recognize that shame and disgust are, unlike fear and anger, unfortunate atavism that cannot be translated into non-anthropocentric terms. They can recognize that these are the product of distorting, unconscious forces that prevent us from recognizing ourselves as strategic agents who, dispensing with the need to realize their position within a larger order, can instead pursue a secular fulfillment and help others do the same. If the anointed call upon the benighted to “grow” and become “aware,” as Sowell says, it is with precisely this end in mind.

One important reason why conservatives and liberals so often talk past one another is that conservatives believe that it is *they* who stand in opposition to anthropocentricity, which they identify with the hedonic license encouraged by modernist culture—e.g., mass-bohemianization. D'Souza, for example, contends that whereas conservatives embrace the old morality of “external commands,” liberals celebrate a new morality of the “inner self,” a morality of personal autonomy and self-fulfillment.

⁷¹ Ibid., pg. 17.

Whereas conservative morality is “out there,” liberal morality is “in here.”⁷² But this “in here” morality is, from the perspective of liberalism, itself the product of a kind of external command, the mark of *self-discipline* rather than self-indulgence. For it presupposes the discipline to overcome the anthropocentricity that would otherwise becloud any clear distinctions between the “in here” and the “out there,” between the world of human meaning and the world as it exists in itself. This overcoming may eliminate the stigma from certain behaviors, and so legitimate conduct that conservatives deem self-indulgent. But as liberals see it, this self-indulgence is *derivative* upon a prior act of self-control vis-à-vis the “consolations of the enchanted world,” which conservatives appear to indulge without restraint. It is therefore conservatives, and not their targets, who are the actual libertines succumbing to all-too-human temptation. Conservatives may not be hedonic libertines. But they are as liberals see them *teleological libertines*. For they indulge their urge to “realize in one’s own person a place in the pattern, well, fully, with *éclat*” in just the way they accuse others of indulging idiosyncratic, non-socially useful sexual proclivities—yet another respect in which the Left is the Right and the Right is the Left.

3. A Learned Blindness

If conservative claims of cultural oppression refuse to accept liberalism at face value, this is because they refuse to accept this self-discipline at face value, and rather regard the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity as just another ideological weapon in the arsenal of liberalism. While they may be unable to articulate the point theoretically, conservatives sense that the contraposition between disciplined moderns and teleologically self-indulgent pre-moderns is not bedrock natural reality, but rather a social construction of liberalism that distorts an underlying truth, which properly understood redounds to the conservative cause. And we will now examine what this truth might consist in.

Explaining why Jehovah’s Witness schoolchildren could not constitutionally be compelled to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, Justice Jackson famously declared in *West Virginia v. Barnette* that if there is one “fixed star” in the Constitution, it is that “no official, whether high or low, is entitled to prescribe what is orthodox.”⁷³ The proposition seems overwhelmingly compelling in its sheer majesty. But Lawrence Lessig asks how “an idea so plainly false--both as a description of our constitutional past and as a prescription about the proper role of government--can come to appear as foundational truth.”⁷⁴ Justice Jackson’s

⁷² Dinesh D’Souza, *The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and its Responsibility for 9/11* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), pg. 20.

⁷³ *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).

⁷⁴ Lawrence Lessig, *The Regulation of Social Meaning*, 62 U. Chi. L. Rev. 943 (1995).

principle seems workable enough when we consider only limitations on government's power to censor or coerce oaths. But it becomes incredible once we veer our attention away from these central preoccupations of First Amendment law and instead focus it on what Lessig calls the "regulation of social meaning." We then see that government is inescapably implicated in the creation and maintenance of background structures of meaning against which we understand ourselves as both citizens and private actors. And in such cases, the government is clearly prescribing what shall be orthodox notwithstanding that no speech is being either suppressed or coerced.⁷⁵

The regulation of social meaning was why many in the military resisted the open inclusion of gays in their ranks. That inclusion threatened to impose an orthodoxy by ambiguating the social meaning of being a military man. With that status having been defined historically in terms of certain "unambiguously male" virtues—strong, disciplined, emotionless, and, of course, heterosexual—the inclusion of gays, who are stereotyped as effeminate, weak, and irresolute, could not but alter the social meaning of membership in the military, depriving it of its traditional connotations.⁷⁶ Even if no one was compelled to affirm that gays have a rightful place in the military or was kept from opining the contrary, the open inclusion of gays established an orthodoxy. For this inclusion in and of itself sufficed to alter the background social meanings in the context of which opinions are shaped, social meanings that individuals cannot but encounter and in which they must by and large acquiesce. An individual might continue to *posit* that the military enterprise is essentially heterosexual, but this judgment is no longer as it were "built into" the intrinsic meaning of military life, the way ideals of discipline and obedience continue to be.

We cannot strictly speaking believe whatever we will. For the plausibility of our own beliefs for us is a function of whether the social meanings that support them are contested as contingent or accepted as natural. Lessig explains:

When these understandings or expectations become uncontested and invisible, social meanings derived from them appear natural, or necessary. The more they appear natural, or necessary, or uncontested, or invisible, the more powerful or unavoidable or natural social meanings drawn from them appear to be. The converse is also true: the more contested or contingent, the less powerful meanings appear to be.⁷⁷

Social meanings may all be "arbitrary" from within some cosmic perspective. But it is a prime requisite of a social life that their arbitrariness be misrecognized as part of ineluctable nature.⁷⁸ For the force of social meanings depends on their *not* appearing constructed—that is, as the products of mere opinion—and

⁷⁵ Ibid., pg. 945-946.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pgs. 987-989.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pg. 955-961.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pg.

instead operating as the “uncontested, or taken-for-granted, background of thought or expectation.”⁷⁹ Given that this background cannot simply be disregarded, social meanings therefore “empower or constrain individuals, whether or not the individual chooses the power or constraints.” They are “‘forces to be reckoned with,’ by the weakest as well as the strong.”⁸⁰ This idea is captured in John Searle’s observation that social reality is at once “epistemically objective” and “ontologically subjective.”⁸¹ It is ontologically subjective in that social reality is, unlike natural reality, causally dependent on the aggregated activity of individuals engaged in shared social practices, which are what create social meanings. But social reality is epistemically objective in that the lone individual is powerless to alter what must impress itself upon his consciousness with the same force as physical reality, as something that is “out there” and not just in the mind.

Social meanings cannot be readily altered by even the strongest of lone individuals because the lone individual has little control over the laws, norms, and practices that determine whether a social meaning is contested as a human creation or taken for granted as natural. This is a function of collective action and so yields a collective action problem. For individuals’ whose self-esteem is predicated on extant social meanings have little incentive to attempt to alter them, given that this requires proselytizing similarly reluctant others. Though a change in these norms would establish a new basis for their self-esteem, rationally self-interested actors will not ordinarily go out on a limb by making an individual sacrifice that can only be compensated by collective success.⁸² This prisoner’s dilemma gives the government, with its ability to incentivize far-reaching changes in human conduct, a special power that the lone individual, no matter how vocal or courageous, lacks. The government represents, not merely one viewpoint among others, but a special power to impinge on the background understandings against which individual viewpoints will resonate as more or less plausible. This is why government is necessarily in the business of establishing orthodoxies, and why Justice Jackson’s announcement, if taken literally, would call the legitimacy of most governmental functions into doubt.⁸³

Lessig traces the mystery of Barnette to a “learned blindness” to the idea of the social construction of meaning which, though common in much social theory, has been routinely ignored in much of law.⁸⁴ But this learned blindness cannot be explained solely by the peculiarities of ephemeral

⁷⁹ Ibid., pg. 951.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pg. 955.

⁸¹ John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), pg. 12-13.

⁸² Ibid., pg. 993.

⁸³ Ibid., pg. 955.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pg. 946.

academic currents. For the dissonance between Justice Jackson's "fixed star" proclamation and what we can all upon reflection recognize is and must be the case is the effect of the hold which the subtraction account and the ideal of disengaged strategic agency have over our cultural self-understanding. On the one hand, we can recognize that the government is necessarily implicated in the construction and deconstruction of social meanings, and hence in the determination of what is orthodox. But on the other, the idea that human beings are first and foremost strategic agents *prevents us from taking the very idea of social meaning seriously*, as a "force to be reckoned with."

For social meanings thus conceived could have no real purchase on the self-understanding of disengaged strategic agents, who inhabit a neutral, naturalistically describable environment in which ideological coercion would have to take the form of direct injunctions. A strategic agent could be prevented from saying or hearing this or that. But being non-anthropocentric through and through, his basic sense of the situation cannot be similarly interfered with. Social meanings might have to be reckoned with by pre-moderns seeking to realize in their own person "a place in the pattern, well, fully, with *éclat*." After all, it is the need to preserve social meanings that induces today's pre-moderns, conservative model citizens, to stigmatize those who veer off sanctioned paths. But genuine moderns who have cast off these illusions and only seek fulfillment—only to satisfy a "felt desire for an object"—should confront no such coefficient of adversity. The learned blindness Lessig describes is broadly cultural rather than narrowly disciplinary because it reflects an understanding of human beings that prevents us from accepting social meanings as genuinely social, as "forces to be reckoned with" rather than merely subjective states.

In blinding us to the regulation of social meaning, the subtraction account of secular modernity also blinds to the existence of what anthropologist Ernest Becker calls *hero-systems*:

The fact is that this is what society is and always has been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules of behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism. Each script is somewhat unique, each culture has a different hero system. What the anthropologists call "cultural relativity" is thus really the relativity of hero-systems the world over. But each cultural system cuts out roles for earthly heroics; each system cuts out roles for performances of various degrees of heroism: from the "high" heroism of a Churchill, a Mao, or a Buddha, to the "low" heroism of the coal miner, the peasant, the simple priest, the plain, everyday, earthy heroism wrought by gnarled working hands guiding a family through hunger and disease.

It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that lasts three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. When Norman O. Brown said that Western society since Newton, no matter how scientific

or secular it claims to be, is still as “religious” as any other, this is what he meant: “civilized” society is a hopeful belief and protest that science, money and goods *make man count* for more than any other animal. In this sense everything that man does is religious and heroic, and yet in danger of being fictitious and fallible.⁸⁵

That society consists in “a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules of behavior” may seem like a rather banal observation. And yet this is a banality which the subtraction account obscures. For that account relegates man’s need to “count,” to “earn a feeling of cosmic specialness” to a pre-modern past which has now been transcended by strategic agents. Having liberated themselves from the illusory teleologies that permitted such aspirations, these agents just maneuver through coefficients of adversity toward their desired ends, dismissing any urges toward cosmic significance as illusion and vainglory. By contrast, Becker’s facially banal observations posit a certain *symmetry and continuity* between the pre-modern and the modern, as well as between the religious and the secular, which the subtraction account must deny.

And yet Becker’s observations speak to well-documented human experience. As he remarks, the military leader who “after a short, whispered outline plan of attack, shouts, ‘Let’s go men!’ with proper gravity and conviction, says much more than simply that. He implies that of all times and all places, this is the situation that man should want most to be in; and that ‘to go’ into the attack is unquestionably the greatest, most meaningful act that one could hope to perform.”⁸⁶ Culture, says Becker, “creates us” as agents. And this is because it provides the language and symbols that allow situations to in one way or another “call us to action.” Culture is what *facilitates individual conviction*, and therefore action, by imbuing situations with a significance that would *justify* action. And justification is what human beings want and need. Though attested to by common human experience, these dynamics are fundamentally incongruous with the subtraction account, with our sense of ourselves as disengaged strategic agents whose ends are not determined for them from without, by “forces to be reckoned with.” For strategic agents operate in a neutral environment in which they determine these for themselves. They do not need to be somehow *convinced from without* that their actions are meaningful and justified. This may hold true conservative “model citizens.” But liberals believe that they have transcended this condition.

But they have *not* in fact transcended this condition. Liberals may dismiss the imperative to safeguard some order of things as a primitive atavism for whose costs the conservative bears full responsibility. But as Lessig and Becker each illustrate in their own way, there exists a level of human

⁸⁵ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), pg. 5.

⁸⁶ Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), pg. 98.

experience on which the pre-modern conviction in some “order of things” is a *human constant* and not just a contingent social illusion embraced only by the fearful and anxious. Peter Berger observes,

[I]t may be assumed that a musician in the making in contemporary America must commit himself to music with an emotional intensity that was unnecessary in nineteenth century Vienna, precisely because in the American situation there is powerful competition from what will subjectively appear as the ‘materialistic’ and ‘mass culture’ world of the ‘rat race.’ Similarly, religious training in a pluralistic situation posits the need for ‘artificial’ techniques of reality-accentuation that are unnecessary in a situation dominated by religious monopoly. It is still ‘natural’ to become a Catholic priest in Rome in a way that it is not in America. Consequently, American theological seminaries must cope with the problem of ‘reality-slippage’ and devise techniques for ‘making stick’ the same reality.⁸⁷

Whereas pre-moderns struggled between living a full life with *éclat* and sinking toward the status of a shadow, we deploy techniques of “reality-accentuation” in the hopes of preempting “reality-slippage.” But phenomenologically, the referents are one and the same. If reality-accentuation is in order, this is because the meanings which sustain our self-understandings cannot serve this function while being recognized as mere fictions of the human mind, and must rather be upheld as transcendent existences immune to the vagaries of human predilection—forces “to be reckoned with.” The sense that others have a hand in upholding—or in failing to uphold—an order of things upon which we all depend may seem downright mystical. But framed in another way, it becomes commonsensical. Human beings do not merely entertain an understanding of “what individuals may reasonably expect of one another” but also of “what is to be done.” Our relations are mediated, not only by contractual or quasi-contractual understanding, but also by a shared sense of things’ significance which all have a hand in sustaining.

This is why Berger can observe the “objectivity of the institutional world ‘thickens’ and ‘hardens,’” as social meanings are transmitted from one generation to the next, why these meanings accrue power “by the sheer force of their facticity.”⁸⁸ If we require such thickening and hardening, this is because our identities are intelligible only as *responses* to meanings that *resist* our will, because this what makes our will meaningful. The particular shape which the resistance assumes may vary considerably and be, as Becker says, magical, primitive, and religious or else secular, scientific, and civilized. But in either case, it is nothing that human beings can escape. We may in our more theoretical moods deconstruct this thickening facticity as a social illusion. But this facticity will impinge on us all the same, which is exactly what it must do if we are to function as agents. Our consciousness, writes Berger, is held together by a

⁸⁷ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1967), pgs. 145-56.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 59-60.

“plausibility structure” that in turn presupposes particular social conditions.⁸⁹ And this is because our self-understandings refer not merely to the self, but also to a world of meanings in which that self makes sense, and because sustaining this world depends on others’ conduct.

Seen in this light, the intolerance that liberals detect in conservatives is not the residue of certain outdated cosmological notions, but a function of culture as such. Deviant voices may not actually upset the order of things—as pre-moderns and model citizens believe. But they can under some conditions upset our conviction that this order is what we have taken it to be and, correlatively, that we are as we take ourselves to be. Our identities presuppose particular social narratives. And others’ failure to satisfactorily play *their* parts in the story can upend our efforts to play our own. They can cause “reality-slippage” because their decision to go off-script can upset the plausibility of the narrative against which our own identities are plausible. Just like a movie, our identities can continue to engross us only to the degree that their narrative coherence is established and preserved. Whether or not we elect to designate this narrative coherence as “moral order,” we may all be threatened by those whose actions impliedly call into question the basic purposes governing our lives. What Justice Blackmun calls “mere knowledge that other individuals do not adhere to one’s value system” can present such just a threat, not as an isolated piece of information, but as a data point that resists the narrative that sustains our identities. Deviant behavior contaminates the data set, and so impacts the narrative that may be extrapolated from it.

This is why liberals draw the line between the conservative psychology and their own much too sharply. Liberals believe they have categorially cast off pre-modern illusion. But what Berger calls a “plausibility structure” is simply a secularized, scientifically neutralized translation of the pre-modern “public order” which “everyone lives.” The intolerance that liberals would associate with special features of the conservative personality is in fact intrinsic to cultural membership as such, which involves upholding, not just certain rules and practices, but also the taken-for-granted status of social meanings, which is always precariously maintained. This is why Becker can observe that “[o]ne culture is always a potential menace to another because it is a living example that life can go on heroically within a value framework totally alien to one’s own.”⁹⁰ Cultures can undermine one another because, notwithstanding their great variety, “they all ask and answer the same basic questions.”⁹¹ In revealing the fictional nature of one culture’s answers to these questions, another culture can undermine the necessary precondition of a hero-system, and thereby to reduce its adherents to the status of animals among animals.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ibid., pg. 16.

⁹⁰ Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, pg. 140.

⁹¹ Ibid., pg. 113.

⁹² Ibid., pg. 140.

The identity-preserving function of culture may go largely unnoticed in everyday life. But we become more acutely aware of this function in our responses to whatever threatens it. Berger notes that *nihilation* is an attempt to neutralize threats to the objectivity of certain social meanings through “conceptual liquidation,” which assigns these threats “an inferior ontological status, and thereby a not-to-be-taken-seriously cognitive status.” By “translating” a threat to a symbolic universe into concepts derived from out of that symbolic universe, “the negation of one’s universe is subtly changed into an affirmation of it.”⁹³ Thus, critics who dispute the fairness or legitimacy of a certain institution will be conceptually liquidated through the counter-charge that their criticisms are just sour-grapes-style resentment in the face of their failure to gain entry into the institution. What had been a threat to institutional legitimacy is thereby translated into an affirmation of institutional legitimacy, because the social meaning of their critique now resides in the “chip on their shoulder” that highlights the desirability of the very thing being criticized.

But these translations of negations into affirmations would be unnecessary were we just strategic agents navigating from one point to another in a neutral environment, because that environment would simply consist in a set of instrumental relations that require no such affirmation. This reality would not have to be “accentuated” because there could be no danger that it might “slip.” Strategic agents represent, plan, calculate, and expedite, but they do not nihilate, because they are not beholden to anything that needs to be defended in this manner. The *success* of their activities might be threatened from without, but their activities’ *meaning* cannot be. Human beings *do* in fact nihilate, however. And this is why liberals’ self-image as strategic agents having cast off the confining teleological distortions of the past is fundamentally untenable, a distortion of what human beings are actually like. Liberals may react to conservatives’ claims of psychic or communal harm with dismissive indignation, as Smith observes. But our vulnerability to such harms is built into the structure of our agency, and it is only liberals’ commitment to the subtraction account that blinds them to this human constant.

* * *

Dissenting from the Court’s decision in *Yoder v. Wisconsin* upholding the Free Exercise right of Amish parents to withdraw their children from school at the age of fourteen, Justice Douglas argued that the decision had not taken adequate heed of the children’s own interests. The parents had sought to withdraw their children from school early in order to more effectively inculcate them with the Amish

⁹³ Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, pgs. 114-115.

religion which, being embedded in the Amish way of life, could be undermined by excessive contacts with the modern world. But these parents' designs, argued Douglas, risked forever barring the children's "entry into the new and amazing world of diversity that we have today." The children may aspire to become pianists, astronauts or oceanographers. But if a child "is harnessed to the Amish way of life by those in authority over him and if his education is truncated, his entire life may be stunted and deformed."⁹⁴ These kinds of worries were echoed many years later by Justice Stevens in his concurrence in *Kiryas Joel v. Grummet*, which invalidated a New York law that would have allowed the Satmar, an insular ultra-orthodox Jewish sect, to draw the boundaries of its public school district in a way that provided its children with a culturally homogenous environment. Stevens conceded that this might have spared their children the panic, fear, and trauma of finding themselves in integrated situations—the reason the Satmar were attempting to create their own school district. But it also increased the likelihood that they would "remain within the fold, faithful adherents of their parents' religious faith." The state would then be providing "official support to cement the attachment of young adherents to a particular faith."⁹⁵

In both cases, the objection was not to the religion's substance, but only to the danger that children might become "harnessed" or "cemented" to that substance. In both cases, the suggestion was that religious upbringings hold unique dangers on this front, dangers not encountered in mainstream secular upbringings. But the truth is that we have *all* been "cemented" or "harnessed" to a particular way of life. Becker explains why:

You get a good feeling for what the self "looks like" in its extensions if you imagine the person to be a cylinder with a hollow inside, in which is lodged the self. Out of this cylinder the self overflows and extends into the surroundings, as a kind of huge amoeba, pushing its pseudopods to a wife, a car, a flag, a crushed flower in a secret book. The picture you get is of a huge invisible amoeba spread out over the landscape, with boundaries very far from its own center or home base. Tear and burn the flag, find and destroy the flower in the book, and the amoeba screams with soul-searing pain.

Usually we extend these pseudopods not only to things we hold dear, but also to silly things; our selves are cluttered up with things we don't need, artificial things, debilitating ones. For example, if you extend a pseudopod to your house, as most people do, you might also extend it to the inventory of an interior decorating program. And so you get vitally upset by a piece of wallpaper that bulges, a shelf that does not join, a light fixture that "isn't right." Often you see the grotesque spectacle of a marvelous human organism breaking into violent arguments, or even crying, over a panel that doesn't match. Interior decorators confide that many people have somatic symptoms or actual nervous breakdowns when they are redecorating. And I have seen a grown and silver-templed Italian crying in the street in his mother's arms over a small dent in the bumper of his Ferrari.

⁹⁴ *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205, 246 (1972) (Douglas, J., dissenting).

⁹⁵ *Board of Education of Kiryas Joel School District v. Grumet*, 512 U.S. 687, 749 (Stevens, J., concurring).

We call precisely those people “strong” who can withdraw a pseudopod at will from trifling parts of their identity, or especially from important ones. Someone who can say “it is only a scratch on a Ferrari,” “the uneven wall is not me, the wood crack is not me,” and so on. They disentangle themselves easily and flexibly from the little damages and ravages to their self-extensions....⁹⁶

The passage illustrates what is once again a wide discrepancy between our actual lived experience and our cultural self-understanding as disengaged strategic agents maneuvering within a neutral environment denuded of supra-individual significance. The *contents* of these preoccupations—bulging wallpaper, disjointed shelves—are quintessentially modern. But their *structure* embodies something akin to the pre-modern sense of inhabiting an order in relation to which one must position oneself if one is to live up to one’s identity. These individuals may describe themselves as pursuing modern fulfillment. But close inspection of the tissue of their lived experience reveals that they are attempting to cleave to what they feel is an order of things. For the meaning of failure here transcends mere frustration, and rather involves the vague sense that they are somehow sinking toward the status of a shadow, deprived of the conditions under which they can be who they are. And this is why they experience such difficulty withdrawing their pseudopods from what look like mere trifles from the outside.

Disengagement is a *possibility*, of course, as when we with naturalistic lucidity recognizes that “it is only a scratch on a Ferrari.” But as Becker illustrates, disengagement is something that may or may not be precipitated on specific occasions in response to a specific confluence of factors. It is *not* the perennial fabric of our experience. It is not something that accrues to us by virtue of having once and for all overthrown the confining horizons of a benighted teleological past. We are not strategic agents in actual life because all of our calculations and planning must reckon with a background sense of things’ significance which pre-exists these, delimiting the directions which they can take. This is exactly what Becker describes in harrowing detail. Very few people, then, inhabit Justice Douglas’s “amazing world of diversity.” And yet liberals tend to imagine that secular commitments are somehow resistant to the pseudopodic ossification described by Becker. Secularism is imagined to somehow permit our Beckerean amoebas to retreat back into their cylinders at will, to make contact with the world without submitting to its solicitations—that is, without the risk of harnessing or cementing. Liberals can recognize the cemented layer of our experience as a human constant once it is artificially placed into relief, of course. But at other times, they are disposed to cast it as a special disability that uniquely afflicts a certain kind of religious believer, the product of constraining horizons from which free-thinkers have liberated themselves. And

⁹⁶ Becker, *Birth and Death of Meaning*, pg. 34.

this conviction once again originates in the cultural allure of the subtraction account and the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, which calls upon us to see ourselves in a certain way.

The strategic understanding of agency reflects what Taylor calls “that recurrent figure which our civilization aspires to realize, the disembodied ego, the subject who can objectify all being, including his own,” and thereby achieve “total self-possession.”⁹⁷ But this is an impossible aspiration. And William Barrett explains why:

.....man does not look out upon an external world through windows, from the isolation of his ego: he is already out-of-doors. He is in the world because, existing, he is involved in it totally. Existence itself, according to Heidegger, means to stand outside oneself, to be beyond oneself. My Being is not something that takes place inside my skin (or inside an immaterial substance inside that skin); my Being, rather, is spread over a field or region which is the world of its care and concern. Heidegger’s theory of man (and of Being) might be called the Field Theory of Man....⁹⁸

To be sure, this existence is always *mine*; it is not an impersonal fact, as the existence of a table is merely to be an individual case of the class table. Nevertheless, the mineness of my existence does not consist in the fact that there is an I-substance at the center of my field, but rather in that this mine-ness permeates the whole field of my Being.⁹⁹

We are always “already out of doors” because even the most psychically versatile modern is, as Heidegger says, *thrown* into the world, thrown into a pre-reflective, pre-theorized “understanding-of-Being.” This primordial sense of what the situation “calls for” can never be fully articulated because it forms the silent backdrop of reflective articulation. And this is what the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity *conceals* from us. For this pre-reflective layer of experience is incongruous with a certain conception of human identity, with the self-possession upon the modern, liberal dispensation premises our peculiarly human dignity. On this view, to preserve this dignity is to maintain a clear view of our “I-substance,” to clearly distinguish it from what lies without. Liberals understand secularism and liberal values generally as promoting this clarity, which is exactly why conservatives are seen as in one degree or another lacking the full agency powers enjoyed by liberals.

But this conception of human dignity and the identity it expresses *distorts* our basic structure as agents, which cannot in fact be disentangled from the social world into which we are always already thrown. We do not, in our everyday experience, encounter the world as would a strategic agent, as an enumerable set of “things” each of whose “properties” may or may not be relevant to our ends. Quite the contrary, the significance we sense always inheres *in* things *prior* to any reflection on “our” ends. Heidegger writes:

⁹⁷ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, pg. 35.

⁹⁸ William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1958), pg. 217.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 219.

In our 'description' of that environment which is closest to us—the work-world of the craftsman, for example,—the outcome was that along with the equipment to be found when one is at work [in Arbeit], those Others for whom the 'work' ["Werk"] is destined are 'encountered too.' If this is ready-to-hand, then there lies in the kind of Being which belongs to it (that is, involvement) an essential assignment or reference to possible wearers, for instance, for whom it should be 'cut to the figure'. Similarly, when material is put to use, we encounter its producer or 'supplier' as one who 'serves' well or badly. When, for example, we walk along the edge of a field but 'outside it', the field shows itself as belonging to such-and-such a person, and decently kept up by him; the book we have used was bought at So-and-so's shop and given by such-and-such a person, and so forth. The boat anchored at the shore is assigned in its Being-in-itself to an acquaintance who undertakes voyages with it; but even if it is a 'boat which is strange to us', it still is indicative of Others. The Others who are thus 'encountered' in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some Thing which is just present-at-hand; such 'Things' are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for Others—a world which is always mine too in advance.¹⁰⁰

Heidegger is here arguing in opposition to the Cartesian tradition according to which our everyday consciousness is theoretical and proto-scientific. On this view, everyday consciousness is simply a cruder, more error-prone version of the stance which science actualizes with greater rigor. As "minds," we encounter a world constituted by discrete objects with self-contained qualities and quantifiable relations to each other. And it is the purpose of rational thought, our distinctively human capacity, to determine what these qualities and relations are. But Heidegger believed this picture of the human agent was fundamentally misbegotten. Everyday consciousness encounters the world primordially not as "present-at-hand" but as "ready-to-hand," not as a set of qualities but as a set of *uses*. The world first stands out to us, not as an agglomeration of things, but as a totality of *equipment*, each part of which refers us, not to our "inner" desires and stratagems, but to a *public* world, an interrelated web of shared social understandings designating the purposes and uses of what we encounter. Only later do these understandings become appropriated and individualized as "our own."

As Charles Guignon explains, in "roads, streets, bridges, buildings, our concern discovers nature as having some definite direction."¹⁰¹ And implicit in this "definite direction" is a set of communal objectives and understandings in relation to which our identities are defined. What Barrett calls our "mine-ness" can "permeate" the whole "field" of our being because it is by way of these social understandings—and *not* any disengaged and disembodied inner self—that our identities are first revealed to us. Since these understandings embody shared social relations, they ultimately refer us to our *place* within a larger order, without which we would become unintelligible to ourselves. If individuals

¹⁰⁰ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), pg. 153-54.

¹⁰¹ Charles B. Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), pg. 71.

cannot readily alter social meanings at will, this is because that very will originates from out of those meanings. The total self-possession of the strategic agent is illusory because our “mine-ness” and the field of significances toward which it is always “opened out” each permeate one another. The “ready-to-hand” and its “definite direction” *possesses us no less than we possess it*.

The strategic categories through which we ordinarily describe what we are up to—the language of choice, relationships, individual projects and individual affect—therefore *misdescribe* our pre-reflective, pre-articulated experience of our own agency, misdescribe how we actually encounter the world *prior* to describing it. Heidegger, explains Guignon, does not believe that “there is at first a subject with intentions, needs, and goals, which later comes to realize its aims in the world,” because “I can come to discover myself as an agent with beliefs and intentions only derivatively from the more primordial situations in which there is no clear distinction between agency and context of action.”¹⁰² The language of subjectivism artificially dissolves what is in the first instance a primordial, unitary phenomenon into the dualism of merely “subjective” preferences confronting an “objective” world of cause and effect through the effective navigation of which those preferences may be realized. This dualism has become integral to how modern westerners understand themselves. But the language of subjectivism does not *eliminate* the more primordial layer of experience or its role in structuring what our ostensibly subjective preferences come to consist in. This is why we can never truly rise to a non-anthropocentric standpoint, a standpoint that distinguishes the human meanings that exist in the mind from the world as it exists independently of these meanings. The concept of the “mind” as commonly understood in our culture obscures that our projects are *responsive* to a life-world, a pre-reflective layer of experience that structures all of our subsequent reflections. This is what Taylor calls our sense of the “original significance of things.”¹⁰³ And this kind of holistic cognition is not something that can be articulated in the language of strategic action. Consciousness is not merely the capacity to frame representations and plan actions but, prior to this, the process of responding to the world’s “solicitations,” the silent backdrop of what we then go on to conceive of as “inner” desires.

Becker would distinguish between the human amoeba’s various pseudopodic attachments and its “home base.” But Heidegger’s argument is that *there is no home base* in Becker’s sense. The sense of innerness that Becker discerns originates, not in the self-assertion of any central command center, but in the fact that an individual’s pseudopods—or field of “mine-ness” as Barrett says—have become configured in such a way as to *create* the home base. They create a stable frame of reference on whose

¹⁰² Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge*, pg. 98-99.

¹⁰³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pg. 99.

basis *some* pseudopodic attachments can be scrutinized *as* mere attachments rather unthinkingly acquiesced in as the taken-for-granted context of action. But the latter is never fully escaped, because we are as Barret says always outside of ourselves out of doors. Becker believes that strong people can withdraw “a pseudopod at will from trifling parts of their identity.” But doing so requires that one first see those parts *as trifling*, and this presupposes that one’s “field” of significances has shifted in such a way as to permit that distance. Meaning is first encountered in the *world*, not in any disembodied interiority, the experience of which presupposes a modification of that world. These modifications are not the *product* of reflective disengagement but, on the contrary, its *precondition*. Thus, we can now see that even the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity *constitutes a form of engagement*. For its actual contours are always precipitated and structured by shifts transpiring on the pre-reflective level of experience, whose reality will either slip or be accentuated in reflection of both chance and social conditions. The disengaged reflexivity of the strategic agent may produce the *sensation* that the self resides somewhere inside one’s skin. But that sensation presupposes as its unspoken backdrop a particular way of being *outside* one’s skin.

It could not be otherwise. Becker’s ideal of the homebase encourages us to imagine that one might embark upon a path of continuous progress toward ever greater psychic autonomy, until one reached the point at which one is no longer subservient to any pseudopodic extensions, and therefore to the shared social understandings that underpin them. But that picture is not only psychologically unrealistic but conceptually incoherent as well. As K. Anthony Appiah remarks, people’s “conception of the good or well-lived life would be undermined by their imagining it to be a wholly volitional affair, chosen among equally qualified candidates.”¹⁰⁴ To have complete independence of mind would ultimately mean “not to be ‘minded’ at all,” as one would lack any fixed horizons of decision-making.¹⁰⁵ Being “minded” involves some sense of submitting to the world’s solicitations, the sense that we are being called upon to act as we do by what is *effectively* a transcendent dispensation. Our desires can be experienced as expressions of an underlying will only to the extent they are responsive to these solicitations, which in exercising their hold on us assure that we will not be inclined to second-guess our commitments the next instant. Absent such horizons, the process of deliberation would come to resemble a brute competition of impulses seizing us by surprise.

Becker’s ideal calls upon our amoeba to achieve complete disentanglement from its prior identifications, so as to become capable of assuming subsequent ones voluntarily. But on what basis could

¹⁰⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton University Press 2005), pg. 47.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 53.

these subsequent identifications be chosen? Having extricated itself from its earlier identifications, our amoeba will now lack any basis upon which to choose new ones. A choice to embrace certain “values” which does not itself express a more basic, pre-existing commitment would be a choice for which we could provide no reasons—a choice which does not reflect any criterion of judgment because the commitments that could motivate that criterion have yet to be chosen. And a choice of this kind would not be genuine in any humanly meaningful sense. To the extent genuine desires may be distinguished from arbitrary impulses, this is only because our agency is encumbered by something on whose basis the distinction can be effected, because it is *weighed down* by social meanings, by the thickening objectivity of the institutional world. Social meanings can constrain us because they are the grounds of our identities. To preserve identity is to contain freedom—to limit the range of life possibilities that one can *seriously* contemplate. For this narrowness is the *sine qua non* of taking *oneself* seriously, and what social meanings allow us to maintain. A field of social meanings not only confronts us as a force to be reckoned with, but moreover *permeates* us as the unspoken substratum of our very agency.

This is not to suggest that human beings are in each and every case powerfully impressed by a deep sense of their actions’ meaningfulness. The Field Theory of Man refers, not to the presence of particular subjective states, but to the structure of human agency, the condition from within which subjective states carry what meaning they do. We may not always feel compellingly “solicited” toward a specific course of action, but this solicitation and its absence are not things to which we can ever stay indifferent. For they are the predicates of our sense of agency, or its felt absence. The naturalistic stance in which subjective and objective are rigorously distinguished is simply incongruous with our agency as we live it—or rather, as we *need* to live it. Hence existentialist invocations of angst and nausea, which provide harrowing descriptions of individuals who as a consequence of their disengagement find themselves incapable of accepting culturally-sanctioned answers to the problem of human identity, and so find their sense of self compromised by its very “open-mindedness.”

* * *

The upshot of all these observations is that *there exists a layer of universal human experience with respect to which the self-understanding of pre-moderns is more veridical than that of moderns*. The particular *contents* of pre-modern cosmologies may have to be rejected in favor of modern scientific discovery. But the *structure* of the pre-modern self-understanding reflected greater attunement to a perennial feature of human agency, which is retained by moderns notwithstanding that it is denied in their official self-conceptions.

In arguing that the ancients possessed a superior “understanding of Being” than do moderns, Heidegger was describing the development of the modern consciousness as the progressive *impoverishment* of our intuitive attunement to what Barret calls the Field Theory of Man. As Guignon notes, the sense that the self is a kind of placeholder within a broader social structure was articulated by the Greeks in the idea of the *oikos* and later the *polis*, and then by medieval Christianity through the idea of a divinely ordained hierarchy.¹⁰⁶ Officially, this sense of embeddedness has been replaced by the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. But what pre-moderns articulated explicitly remains with us implicitly in our pre-reflective everyday engagement with the world, whose true structure is not captured by that ethos and the language of disembodied inwardness. This inwardness is not “unreal,” but it is *derivative*. And the cultural distortion lies in the mistaken sense that it is the primordial phenomenon, a sense that is sustained by the cultural prestige of the subtraction account. The pre-modern imperative to “realize in one’s own person a place in the pattern, well, fully, with *éclat*” has not been subtracted, but has merely *receded* into the unacknowledged background of consciousness. For the self-possessed strategic agent—“that recurrent figure which our civilization aspires to realize”—has simply been *superimposed* on a more primordial layer of experience that it cannot supplant but which it also refuses to acknowledge.

The strategic understanding of the human agent is naturalistic inasmuch as it seems to free us from any untenably anthropocentric teleological commitments. But it is also in tension with naturalism inasmuch as it conceals the culturally *embodied* character of our consciousness and sense of inwardness. Becker writes:

We must realize simply that this is how this animal must act if he is to function as this animal. Man’s fictions are not superfluous creations that could be “put aside” so that the “more serious” business of life could continue. The flesh-and-blood action of lower animals is no more infused with seriousness than is the ethereal symbolic conduct with which man organizes his dominion over nature. We may deal with flimsier coin, but, like the abstractness of high finance, the business is even more serious for it.¹⁰⁷

It is precisely the ideal of the disengaged, self-possessed strategic agent which motivates the cultural conviction that hero-systems are somehow “intangible,” “merely symbolic,” or lacking the “seriousness” of hard-nosed utilitarian rationality. But this conviction is at odds with a genuinely sophisticated naturalism that understands the mind, not as a disembodied homunculus or “soul,” but as the outgrowth of natural processes, including social processes, without which we would not be recognizably human. Our “pre-modern” layer of experience is an ineluctable human constant because human beings are

¹⁰⁶ Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge*, pg. 108.

¹⁰⁷ Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, pg. 139.

instinctually impoverished by comparison with other animals. And so they must as Becker says become “symbolically re-instinctivized,” just as other animals are “physio-chemically instinctivized.”¹⁰⁸ The pre-modern “order of things” is merely the conscious manifestation of this instinctivization. Making much the same point, Berger observes that, with their instinctual poverty depriving humans of any “species-specific environment,” they are placed in a condition of “world-openness” which can only be remedied through a social reality that lends to our biological substratum a structure that does not accrue to it naturally.¹⁰⁹ And in the same vein, Clifford Geertz writes that the extreme, generality, diffuseness, and variability of our innate, genetically endowed response capacities makes the assistance of cultural patterns indispensable. Without this assistance, we would be but formless monsters, “with neither sense of direction nor power of self-control, a chaos of spasmodic impulses and vague emotions.”¹¹⁰

However the point is put, the upshot is that the pre-modern layer of experience—a sense of oneself as operating against a background order in relation to which one must remain satisfactorily positioned—is only superficially vainglorious self-delusion. For a suitably sophisticated naturalism reveals it as integral to our organismic functioning, as integral “flesh-and-blood” action. Human agency is necessarily extended over a field of social meanings because it is only by means of these meanings that what lies “inside” our skins becomes ordered and integrated. Hero-systems are not idle “symbolic” luxuries, intangible “cultural” concerns, but rather a biological necessity.

4. The Symbolic and the Substantive

The mystery is why liberals can easily recognize these human constants in their capacity as philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and legal theorists at the same time as they are impelled to downplay them in their capacity as political actors. Here, they will rather sharply dichotomize the psychologies of liberals and conservatives and conclude that conservatives are uniquely benighted, beholden to compulsions of which liberals are entirely free. Declaring his “opposition” to gay marriage, satirist Stephen Colbert explained:

Marriage is the basic building block of society. And if gay men get married, that threatens my marriage immediately because I only got married as a taunt toward gay men because they couldn't... I just don't know else—why I got married other than to rub it in gay people's faces.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pg. 184.

¹⁰⁹ Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, pg. 47-51.

¹¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Fontana Press, 1993), pg.99.

¹¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAPPnv6BpsU>.

As emphatic as some conservatives may be in their warnings that same-sex marriage threatens the basic institution of marriage, they have always been at a loss to explain how precisely this should be. How could the presence of the same-sex couple next door possibly impinge on the stability of one's own marriage? So the liberal reflex has always been to dismiss the conservative view as just thinly disguised mean-spiritedness, or else as the symptom of some unacknowledged fear or anxiety that is being "taken out" on those who have nothing to do with the conservative's real problems, which are being disguised in ostensible worries about the preservation of the traditional family. This, after all, is one of the reasons why the benighted must "grow" and become "aware."

But many on the Left have in more sophisticated terms *acknowledged* that the destruction of the family is precisely their aim, and that same sex-marriage will, beyond extending legal rights to gay and lesbian couples, be tactically useful to this end. Lesbian activist Masha Gessen told a sympathetic audience:

Gay marriage is a lie. Fighting for gay marriage generally involves lying about what we're going to do with marriage when we get there. It's a no-brainer that the institution of marriage should not exist. ... 'Marriage equality' becomes 'marriage elasticity,' with the ultimate goal of 'marriage extinction.'

She explained that

I have three kids who have five parents, more or less, and I don't see why they shouldn't have five parents legally... I met my new partner, and she had just had a baby, and that baby's biological father is my brother, and my daughter's biological father is a man who lives in Russia, and my adopted son also considers him his father. So the five parents break down into two groups of three... And really, I would like to live in a legal system that is capable of reflecting that reality, and I don't think that's compatible with the institution of marriage.¹¹²

If "marriage elasticity" has "marriage extinction" as its ultimate aim, the reason is not that the traditional 1950s-style nuclear family would become somehow criminalized, but that such elasticity would erode the hero-system that has historically underpinned that family, depriving that institution of its traditional social meaning. The "family" being targeted by the "homosexual agenda" is not the bare practices of cohabitation, financial interdependence, and child rearing by legally bound adults, but the hero-system of social conservatives, that thick structure of aspirational roles invoked by talk of traditional family values. And this is exactly what conservatives are referring to in warning that the family is under attack.

The institution of same-sex marriage can carry implications for heterosexual couples insofar as "traditional marriage" thereby becomes but one possible interpretation of a civil institution, rather than

¹¹² <http://www.inquisitr.com/641413/gay-marriage-is-a-lie-lesbian-masha-gessen-and-glenn-beck-agree/>

its intrinsic and uncontested meaning. It constitutes, not merely an expansion of rights, but also the regulation of social meaning, because it can upset the social plausibility, and therefore the personal resonance, of the traditional interpretation notwithstanding that no one is being physically disabled in their marital activities. To the extent marriage becomes socially understood as just another agreement rather than a sacrament, its value will have to be viewed as residing in individual sentiments rather than in a transcendent dispensation that ratifies these sentiments. Traditionalists are thereby threatened with a different interpretation of themselves, confronted with the possibility that the sacredness which they had imputed to their practices is but the reification of their own idiosyncratic emotions. Nothing prevents them from asserting that whatever the legal status of same-sex marriage may be, it is only marriages like their own that truly count in the eyes of God. But given 1) that this interpretation is now contested and 2) that social meanings are “forces to be reckoned with,” the meaning with which traditionalists would like to imbue their marriages will not necessarily be the meaning that their marriages actually end up carrying for them. Conservatives worries about liberals’ “attack on the family” are therefore more sophisticated than liberals are prepared to acknowledge.

Certainly, one reason why liberals greet warnings about threats to “traditional values” with “dismissive indignation,” belittling these as “vague premonitions of erosion or unraveling,” is that they do not accept the “pre-modern” dynamics they betray at face value. Whereas pre-moderns failed to recognize what Searle calls the “ontological subjectivity” of social meanings, modern liberals do recognize it and so seek to articulate “the thickening objectivity of the institutional world” naturalistically and sociologically rather than metaphysically, as the product of human practices rather than the emanation of some transcendent dispensation. Whilst traditionalists are fixated on the “epistemic objectivity” of their social meanings—the fact that they are “forces to be reckoned with”—the liberals who would overthrow these meanings emphasize their ontological subjectivity. In “relativizing” the epistemically objective into the ontologically subjective, they hope to dissolve the power of heretofore taken-for-granted social meanings by highlighting their contingent origins in the coordinated meaning-generating activities of human beings—the recognition of which will compel people to then take these meanings less “seriously.”

However, the issue here is not whether conservatives’ “pre-modern” social dynamics must be taken at face value, or whether the political demands that issue from them are justified, but rather the “dismissive indignation” with which they are generally greeted by liberals. That outraged incredulity expresses, not mere moral disagreement, but the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity and the condemnation of those who have failed to realize it. It is intended to signal, not simply a different

vision of the good, but the naturalistic lucidity of the disengaged subject, who is not “taken in” by the visceral, pre-reflective social meanings that beguile conservatives. Liberals’ dismissive indignation before the social meanings of conservatives therefore has a distinct social meaning of its own.

But as Smith recognizes, this dismissive indignation is disingenuous. For just like shame and disgust for Nussbaum, this dismissiveness reflects “an aspiration to be the kind of being one is not,” an aspiration that is “just not in line with life as we know it.” The subtext of liberals’ outrage is that we can subtract the pre-modern layer of human experience and that conservatives are guilty of having failed to do so. But this subtraction is impossible, as we saw, merely a cultural fiction. And this is why conservatives’ “vague premonitions of erosion or unraveling” refer to the erosion and unraveling of something real, something on which human beings are genuinely dependent, which they do really encounter as an independent object—forces “to be reckoned with.” Yet this is exactly what liberals’ outraged incredulity is intended to deny. The purpose of this denial is not simply to condemn conservatives morally, but to impugn their basic competence as human agents, to highlight their failure to realize their human essence as strategic agents liberated from the confining horizons of a benighted past.

Same-sex marriage is a “lie” because the evolution of social meaning that it required involved *lying about the very fact of social meaning*. The promotion of same-sex marriage delegitimized a certain range of social meanings, not by disputing their substantive content, but by portraying their adherents, traditionalists, as compromised by a unique heteronomy of which their liberal opponents are free. What Lessig calls our “learned blindness” to social meaning is also a politically expedient blindness. It is not only an unconscious habit, but moreover a rhetorical tactic. By implicitly invoking the subtraction contrast between the disengaged subject and heteronomous pre-moderns, it places traditionalists at a rhetorical disadvantage that they do not deserve, reducing them to Stephen Colberts pleading for their right to rub their marriages in gay people’s faces.

Intolerance must remain downright mysterious once we conceive of human beings as strategic agents—perhaps self-interested contractors in pursuit of maximal utility. But it becomes more intelligible in the context of hero-systems, as an attempt to safeguard these against whatever threatens to reveal their arbitrariness, contingency, or socially constructed character. This is something the Left can recognize in other contexts. Where the benighted traditionalist speaks of some ethereal “social fiber,” the post-modern sophisticate speaks of “social constructions.” But *the underlying referent is the same*, a hero-system, the socially sustained meanings that fortify individuals in their identities. This is what conservatives defend and what liberals attack. Which side of the culture wars, then, is the disingenuous

one? Whether the destruction of the “traditional family” is morally desirable is a separate question, of course. But even if this is a “no-brainer,” as Gessen says, is it equally obvious that conservative claims of cultural oppression are more disingenuous than the outraged incredulity with which they are always greeted by liberals?

Following Martha Nussbaum, liberals will dismiss opposition to same-sex marriage as a symptom “narcissistic fear and aggression” awoken by “anxiety about change that eludes control, and the loss of control over cherished values.”¹¹³ But they can, upon adopting a suitably sophisticated sociological stance, recognize that this kind of narcissistic fear and aggression is not a weakness unique to social conservatives. On the contrary, it is a human constant that can work itself out in a great many ways, either crudely or subtly, and with or without any overtly religious or moralistic trappings. And yet what liberals can recognize in theoretical contexts is quickly forgotten in more heated political ones, where conservatives are judged according to ideals of strategic agency that no one would be prepared to apply consistently. Conservatives’ visceral conviction that the liberal culture is holding them down through oppressive dualisms and double-standards originates in just this disingenuousness. This is why they urge us to recognize the human constants that would undermine the dualisms that this disingenuousness has facilitated, to recognize the *symmetries* that go unacknowledged by the liberal culture.

* * *

Gay rights are merely one of many fronts on which liberals chide conservatives for having irrationally fetishized merely “symbolic” concerns at the expense of genuinely “substantive” ones. Republicans, writes Nunberg, have demonstrated an “ability to change the political subject,” to divert “resentments that have their roots in economic inequalities into debates over ‘values.’”¹¹⁴ Voters’ “apparent willingness to subordinate substantive interests to symbolic ones” has been the decisive factor since the Nixon years, when Republicans first began invoking symbolic concerns in an appeal to Southern and working-class voters.¹¹⁵ But this diagnosis springs from the very cultural distortions we have been examining. Liberals’ exasperation over conservatives’ preoccupation with “intangible” or “merely symbolic” goods like national honor, the moral fiber of society, and so forth is merely the latest iteration of the social ideals by which the modern age has from its inception sought to distinguish itself from all

¹¹³ Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, pg. 260.

¹¹⁴ Geoffrey Nunberg, *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left Wing Freak Show* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), pg. 15.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 7.

earlier times. The sharp dichotomization between the “symbolic” and the “substantive” is simply one way of articulating the subtraction account-inspired contraposition between superstitious pre-moderns self-indulgently succumbing to the allure of inherited teleological regimes and self-critical moderns with the discipline to resist these temptations and direct their attention toward natural causality and its bearing on “fulfillment.” Whereas conservatives are governed by the passions, liberals are governed by the interests.

But the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity is not invoked when it comes to liberals’ own “merely cultural” preoccupations. Liberals have no difficulty recognizing the *seriousness* of the symbolic in the context of multiculturalism, for example. Here, it is conservatives who will reduce the symbolic to some form of socio-economic frustration, to free-floating, self-indulgent identitarian preoccupations uprooted from the harsh truths of everyday life in the real world. Sowell observes:

The world of the anointed is a very tidy place—or, put differently, every deviation of the real world from the tidiness of their vision is considered to be someone’s fault....Unfulfilled yearnings or chafing inhibitions have no place in this tidy world of the anointed, where even an inadequate supply of group heroes and historic group achievements is someone else’s fault, presumably the historians’. It is a world where reality is ‘socially constructed’ and can therefore be ‘deconstructed’ and then reassembled to one’s heart’s desires.¹¹⁶

If the number of black scientists and inventors acknowledged in high school history textbooks is of sufficient importance to the self-esteem, and therefore the long-term life-prospects, of black students as to qualify as substantive rather than symbolic, then why should the question of whether America was at its inception a “Christian nation” be dismissed as a “distraction” from the bona fide “substantive” interests of religious conservatives? Is there not a double-standard here? The line between the symbolic and the substantive thus appears to have been drawn in the service of liberal ideology. D’Souza asks “Why are many liberals obsessed with whether there is prayer at a school graduation or whether the local town hall has a Christmas crèche? What possible harm is being done by such things?”¹¹⁷ If the desire to place a crèche in a town hall qualifies as a purely symbolic aspiration, then so, it seems, should be the desire to remove it. And yet this symmetry goes unacknowledged by liberals. They may retort that even ostensibly minor encroachments against the wall of separation between church and state bring us one step closer to a bona fide theocracy or new wars of religion, which is surely a substantive worry. But given the speculative character of such slippery slope reasoning, this very forecast can be suspected as the symbolic

¹¹⁶ Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (New York: Basic Books 1995), pg. 244-45.

¹¹⁷ D’Souza, *The Enemy at Home*, pg. 200.

expression of the Left's cultural aversion to religion, which is being *disguised* as a substantive concern. And this is what conservatives in fact suspect.

Can *What's the Matter with Kansas?* itself be explained in terms of the theory of human nature that informs its characterizations of conservatives? Did Thomas Frank embark upon his career as a political writer in order to maximize his purely economic utility, or was he prepared to sacrifice the latter in the name of what he considered a higher ideal, irrespective of whether it bore financial rewards? Liberals do not generally presume that starving artists in Brooklyn have been "distracted" from their "real" self-interest by the bohemian culture, which does not offer the tangible rewards of an MBA. Nor do they thus judge all the left-leaning academics in the humanities who have forfeited higher salaries in the private sector in order to occupy themselves with constructing and deconstructing social reality, as Sowell says. Nunberg charges that conservatives divert resentments originating in economic inequality into debates about values. But radical academics in the humanities and their sympathizers would not accept the conservative charge that their theories are but manifestations of transmuted socio-economic resentment, psychic compensation for subpar salaries and subpar prestige. These are not the kinds of people who find themselves accused by liberals of self-deludingly sacrificing the substantive to the symbolic, of cultivating of vague cultural grievances that can never be appeased.

The Left does not consistently elevate the economic over the cultural as such. What is dismissed as "merely symbolic" is really the particular range of cultural preoccupations associated with conservative claims of cultural oppression. It is these, not the sphere of the symbolic *per se*—whatever its precise boundaries—that are dismissed as somehow ethereal and subjective by comparison with the tangible, objective, practical sphere of economic achievement. Wherever we look, the line between the symbolic and the substantive will fluctuate according what serves the ends of liberals. As Goldberg observes, only when "conservatives have the upper hand on a cultural issue" do liberals insist that only bread and butter issues are serious issues. But when liberals are "on offense," then "it's all about racial quotas, mainstreaming gay culture, scrubbing the public square of Christianity, and a host of explicitly cultural ambitions."¹¹⁸ Symbolic cultural grievances are denied reality and tangibility only when voiced in the less eloquent and theoretically refined terms of the ordinary American but celebrated as "idealism" and "insight" whenever conveyed in the professionalized lingo of credentialed academic elites. In *this* context, the suggestion that cultural preoccupations lack the seriousness of bona fide economic productivity will be dismissed as just old-fashioned anti-intellectualism.

¹¹⁸ Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pg. 358.

These observations provide the beginnings of an answer to the questions with which we concluded Chapter 3. If liberals have been projecting their own vices onto conservatives, foremost among these vices is surely their own status as symbolic animals seeking cosmic specialness through a socially-sustained hero-system. Liberals may concede that they share in normal human folly. But whereas they chalk up their own zeal, blindness, and arrogance to generic human imperfection, they trace the zeal, blindness, and arrogance of conservatives to uniquely suffered heteronomy before a hero-system—which liberals have in their superior cognitive and emotional maturity transcended. Liberals can thereby identify conservatives with animal-like symbolic re-instinctivizations while arrogating to themselves the status of a disengaged, self-possessed consciousness having objectified all being, including their own. Liberals are serious and mature but conservatives are frivolous and immature, still mired in the teleological past from which liberals have freed themselves. Once this is accepted, dismissive indignation becomes the only logical response to conservatism.

5. Deceptive and Self-Deceptive Histrionic Mimicry

The subtraction account of modernity and secularity would lead one to expect that the stance of strategic disengagement will constitute the perennial fabric of our experience, because what had impeded this has been eliminated. But it does *not* as a matter of fact constitute the perennial fabric of our experience, which remains structured by a socially sustained sense of transcendence. For as we have seen, the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity can only be deployed selectively, to undermine what is merely a certain range of symbolic concerns and not symbolic concern as such. It therefore seems that what the subtraction account represents as an underlying feature of human nature is in reality something else. And this is what an alternative theory of modernity would have to explain. In doing so, it would also be explaining conservative claims of cultural oppression, which are reactions to this selectivity.

I will term this alternative theory of modernity the “mutation counter-narrative,” and will expound it in considerable depth in the next chapter. But the crucial idea for present purposes is that what the subtraction account misrecognizes as underlying features of human nature that remain upon eliminating certain earlier, confining horizons are in truth *mutations of what has presumably been eliminated*. The modern, strategic agent is not the categorical overcoming of earlier cultures’ socially-sustained sense of transcendence, but merely a mutation of some of its elements. Hegel’s gives us part of this idea here:

The realization first arose in religion, in the innermost region of spirit; but to introduce it into the secular world was a further task which could only be solved and fulfilled by a long and severe effort of civilization. Thus slavery did not cease immediately with the acceptance of the Christian religion. Liberty did not suddenly predominate in states nor reason in governments and constitutions. The application of the principle to secular conditions, the thorough molding and interpenetration of the secular world by it, is precisely the long process of history. I have already drawn attention to this distinction between a principle as such and its application, its introduction and execution in the actuality of life and spirit. This is a fundamental fact in our science and must be kept constantly in mind. Just as we noted it in the Christian principle of self-consciousness and freedom, so it shows itself in the principle of self-consciousness and freedom in general. World history is progress of the consciousness of freedom.¹¹⁹

“Secularization” on the mutation counter-narrative is not the lopping off of religion, but the “thorough molding and interpenetration of the secular world” by religion. For the secular is necessarily the secularization *of* something that is not itself secular, the reinterpretation and internalization by consciousness of religious ideals whose origins can no longer be recognized. The subtraction account identifies secular, naturalistic attitudes with psychological and epistemic liberation from the illusions of pre-modern religious cosmologies. But the mutation counter-narrative characterizes these as late articulations of understandings that were always implicit in those cosmologies.

This is why Taylor can observe that the “ideal of the modern free subject, capable of objectifying the world, and reasoning about it in a detached, instrumental way” is a “novel variant of a very old aspiration to spiritual freedom” with Greek and Christian roots, an aspiration whose “motive force...is closely akin to the traditional drive to spiritual purity.”¹²⁰ Far from being the brute casting off of the religious illusions that supported a broader cosmological order, the ideal of the disengaged strategic agent, liberated from anthropocentricity through naturalistic objectification, is a modification and secularization of a longstanding tradition of religious asceticism, which has now been secularized into the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity.

In its traditional form, this asceticism involved the aspiration to transcend the merely human ambitions that defined the pagan world in order to thereby achieve the vantage point of a larger cosmic order—to rise above the City of Man toward the City of God. In its modern, secularized iteration, the aspiration is to transcend any such cosmic order and achieve the vantage point of a privileged naturalistic lucidity that processes the world in non-anthropocentric terms. As different as these projects are, both are attempts to rise above the prison of what Taylor calls the “peculiarly human emotions,”¹²¹ to relativize these as a kind of blindness which more fully realized humans will have overcome. This is why the

¹¹⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953), pg 24.

¹²⁰ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, pgs. 112-113.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 112-113.

development of the modern is in some sense already implicit in the pre-modern. Secularization turns *against* religion the very ideals that were originally marshaled *by* religion against the taken-for-granted ideals of pagan antiquity. In insisting that we distinguish “between a principle as such and its application, its introduction and execution in the actuality of life and spirit” Hegel permits us to see that while secularization may involve the widespread discarding of many traditional religious *beliefs*, it is also the emergence of a form of *consciousness* that was progressively inculcated by cultural practices that derived from those beliefs. The “principle” may no longer be accepted, or even contemplated. But its real-world “application” is taken for granted, so much so as to go unnoticed.

The subtraction account holds that ordinary human desire is what naturally remains upon the discarding of traditional religious and metaphysical beliefs. But the mutation counter-narrative posits that what we have come to accept as ordinary human desire has a distinctive structure which can only be understood in the context of these ostensibly discarded beliefs. Nietzsche writes:

You are still burdened with those estimates of things that have their origin in the passions and loves of former centuries. Your sobriety still contains a secret and inextinguishable drunkenness. Your love of “reality,” for example—oh, that is a primeval “love.” Every feeling and sensation contains a piece of this old love; and some fantasy, some prejudice, some unreason, some ignorance, some fear, and ever so much else has contributed to it and worked on it.¹²²

What Nietzsche describes as our “inextinguishable drunkenness” before “old loves” refers to what could be termed the “pre-modern residuum,” a “field” of historically bequeathed social meanings atop of which the disengaged strategic subject has merely been superimposed. This ongoing legacy is the reason why the modern liberal identity is “thicker” than liberals ordinarily recognize or care to recognize, why this identity’s putative sobriety and “realism” is circumscribed by old loves that are ordinarily obscured by liberal rationalism. This is why liberalism and what liberals take to be the basic asymmetries between liberalism and conservatism cannot be accepted at face value. For the naturalistic disengagement through which liberalism defines itself is on all sides structured by subtle, taken-for-granted cultural understandings that give concrete shape to abstractions like freedom, equality, religious neutrality, and even Lakoffian nurturance. Given its religious origins, the ethos of disengaged, self-possessed subjectivity is itself a kind “sanctioned path” from which we may not deviate, and this is what liberals are ultimately imposing in imposing their liberalism.

The subtraction account motivates what Taylor describes as our culture’s tendency to “naturalize the features of the modern liberal identity,” rather than to construe these features as “one, historically

¹²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books 1974), pg. 57.

constructed understanding of human agency among others.”¹²³ To naturalize the features of the modern liberal identity is to conceptualize these, not as certain historically contingent and culturally specific developments, but as underlying features of human nature whose meaning does not depend on any such developments. For historical development is then relevant only inasmuch as it is what was required to liberate the underlying features of human nature from earlier, confining illusions and limitations—and *not* because those developments have actually generated, and *remain expressed* in, those features. But this is exactly what the mutation counter-narrative entails. For it posits the historically constructed character of the modern liberal identity in the stronger sense that would actually *explain the selectivity* with which liberals demand that we disengage from the merely cultural or symbolic. That selectivity is simply a manifestation of the spiritual drives that liberals will not acknowledge.

The mutation counter-narrative can explain the selectivity because it enables us to understand the disengaged strategic agent, not as the transcendence of all hero-systems, but as a hero-system in its own right. If the requirements of naturalistic disengagement are invoked selectively and cannot but be invoked selectively, this is because they operate in the service of a hero-system, which arrogates the prestige of naturalistic disengagement without ever fully realizing it in practice. Being bound up with a host of undeclared social practices and mores, this ideal is something that will be invoked in certain contexts and not others, in certain ways and not others, by certain individuals and not others, on behalf of certain causes and not others. This selectivity is not arbitrary personal hypocrisy, but the residue of the past living on within us, the direct manifestation of old loves, the inextinguishable drunkenness that lies not far underneath our pretenses to sober self-possession. Notwithstanding their ostensibly secularism, moderns operate on two different levels. They may articulate their motivations and expectations in terms of “fulfillment,” in hedonic, utilitarian or quasi-utilitarian terms. But this operates in continuous interaction with the pre-modern residuum, the imperative to “realize in one’s own person a place in the pattern, well, fully, with *éclat*.” And it is this interaction that shapes the concrete meaning of their aspirations.

This is the Enlightenment contradiction that conservatives discern intuitively in liberals. MacIntyre observes that the philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries imagined that human affairs could be governed by a certain managerial expertise predicated on value-neutrality and manipulative power derived from a mechanistic understanding of human behavior.¹²⁴ But being intellectualized confused at its foundations, this project could never be genuinely realized, and has instead

¹²³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 571.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 86.

been translated into a “social performance which disguises itself as such an achievement,” a “deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry” of the value-neutrality and scientific detachment which these aspirations presupposed.¹²⁵ With modern social life having turned out “in key part to be the concrete and dramatic re-enactment of eighteenth-century philosophy,” it is now “histrionic success which gives power and authority in our culture,” permitting us to disguise arbitrary will and preference as “hard-headed practical pragmatic no-nonsense realism.”¹²⁶

It is forward-thinking, enlightened liberals who are at the vanguard of these histrionics. What MacIntyre describes as hard-nosed no-nonsense realism is the naturalistic lucidity of the disengaged subject, and what he describes as the realm of arbitrary will and power is the pre-modern residuum—the spiritual aspirations that surreptitiously inform the deeper structure of this naturalistic lucidity. If our culture is now defined by “deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry,” by a social performance masquerading as something more exalted, this is because the modern liberal identity is a hero-system in disguise, a hero-system that must histrionically mimic the transcendence of all hero-systems. With its specific historical pedigree as a form of secularized asceticism having been shrouded over by the subtraction account, liberalism must overlook the specific social mechanisms through which that history is preserved into the present. The mutation counter-narrative promises to uncover just this. It allows us to understand liberalism, not as the bona fide achievement of some neutral perspective, but as a social practice that celebrates certain identities while discrediting others. This is precisely what the histrionic mimicry is intended to achieve, and why conservative claims of cultural oppression are at every turn attempting to expose this mimicry as mimicry.

* * *

Some preliminary illustrations are in order. Conservatives are inclined to deny the right of transgendered individual—say, a biological male who self-identifies as a female—to access public restrooms designated for the opposite biological sex. And liberals typically dismiss this opposition as just another narrow bigotry. But conservatives’ opposition need not rest on bigotry, as they could make the following argument: A biological male is within his rights to self-identify as a female and assign this self-conception ontological preeminence over his biological status. But it is unreasonable for the transgendered individual to expect that others—for whom any such disjunction between biology and identity is entirely foreign—do the same and recognize him as a female. His sexual self-identification is

¹²⁵ Ibid., pg. 85.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pg. 107.

an individual matter, but his biological sexuality is a public one, and others have a right to respond to what they can see and hear. His perspective is legitimate, but theirs is no less so. Both express equal but ultimately incommensurable frameworks of identity. He is on the losing end of this conflict, not because of prejudice, but because of a utilitarian calculus resting on 1) a social consensus that the sexes should be provided with separate restrooms, 2) the fact that he is in the minority and 3) the fact that the resources that can be expended on public restrooms are finite. Someone is going to be made to feel uncomfortable, and it is the greatest good of the greatest number that determines who this will be. If the primary purpose of public restrooms was to serve as forums for authentic self-expression, then the charge of bigotry might hold, because restrictions on transgendered individuals' freedom here could be construed as denial of their basic dignity. But this is plainly not the purpose of public restrooms, which is why a utilitarian calculus is appropriate.

If liberals are disposed to dismiss this utilitarian calculus as narrow prejudice, the reason is that conservatives' resistance to transgendered rights reflects their failure to *rise above* the "peculiarly human emotions," to rise above the natural equation of biological sexuality and ultimate identity. Their preferences cannot be entered into the utilitarian calculus because these preferences reflect what a *failure of virtue*, a failure of *discipline*, a failure to resist the reflexive "common sense"—the unacknowledged teleological libertinism that perceives some deep meaning in human anatomy. While liberals will characterize the "prejudice" which they impute to conservatives as a failure of "enlightenment," a symptom of irrational animus, it is in truth a failure to transcend ordinary embodied perception toward a higher state of spiritual purity and freedom, a failure to embrace the kind of emotional asceticism that would facilitate this transcendence. What liberals present as mere opposition to prejudice is in fact an "old love," their positive promotion of a spiritual ideal, opposition to which must be *socially defined* as prejudice. And that social definition can become a self-fulfilling prophesy. For what conservatives sense is the unacknowledged imposition of a hero-system will predictably spawn resentment toward the transgendered individuals through whom that imposition is being implemented. And so what was originally liberals' deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of a detached non-sectarianism becomes socially vindicated as the genuine article, because it has created at least part of the irrational hatred in opposition to which can define itself.

A similar kind of histrionic mimicry recurs in the liberal understanding of history. Rick Perlstein writes that

Liberalism is rooted in this notion of the Enlightenment, the idea that we can use our reason, and we can use empiricism, and we can sort out facts, and using something like the scientific method—although history is not like nuclear physics—to arrive at consensus views of the truth that have a

much more solid standing, epistemologically, than what the right wing view of the truth is: which is much more mythic, which is much more based on tribal identification, which is much more based on intuition and tradition. And there's always been history writing in that mode too. But within the academy, and within the canons of expertise, and within the canons of professionalism, that kind of history has been superseded by a much more empirical, Enlightenment-based history.¹²⁷

But conservative claimants of cultural oppression do not accept that scientific rigor can explain what they believe is the liberal elites' primordial anti-American hostility, discussed in Chapter 2, their basic conviction that American patriotism is somehow vulgar, pedestrian, or uncivilized. Illustrating the vision of the anointed, Sowell relates that

An internal memorandum of the Smithsonian Institution warned that an exhibit being put together on a leading American fighter plane of World War II should "avoid an overly heroic/cheer-leading/patriotic tone (the same goes for the music)." Those who objected to various other examples of the trashing of American achievements were dismissed by another Smithsonian official as people who don't like exhibits which "undermine their fantasies" and who don't want to be "educated," but prefer instead a museum where they can be "distracted for a moment from the dullness, the tedium, the fear of their lives."¹²⁸

The memorandum's defenders may have seen themselves as acting in the name of a liberal, Enlightenment-based conception of history, and in opposition to the mythical, tribal one favored by the Right. But the narrow requirements of empiricism in the end have no logical bearing on whether the fighter plane should have been surrounded by an "overly heroic/cheer-leading/patriotic tone," let alone what music was to be played. In the strict scientific sense, whether an exhibit undermines or encourages "fantasies" is a function of the facts being presented, not the kinds of enthusiasm which it elicits. It might qualify as a tribalistic distortion was the Smithsonian to employ an overly heroic, cheer-leading tone to distract from the fact that the plane had been involved in malicious attacks against defenseless civilians. But absent such an episode, the need for factual accuracy cannot prescribe the atmospherics. What, then, was it that rendered the atmospherics preferred by liberals more "sophisticated" than those preferred by conservatives?

The memorandum is not an example of actual historical writing. But it serves to illustrate how a deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of scientific detachment can be deployed to surround certain value preferences with an aura of objectivity, when the truth is that scientific objectivity cannot speak to the esteem in which we are to hold military virtue. The memorandum's backers explained their motivations by alluding to the virtues of scientific sobriety. But these virtues were being marshaled, not against any factual falsifications, but against the "peculiarly human emotions" that would be elicited by

¹²⁷ Q't in Chris Mooney, *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), pg. 207.

¹²⁸ Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed*, pg. 121.

an “overly heroic/cheer-leading/patriotic tone.” The histrionic mimicry of objectivity serves to disguise the operation of a hero-system, an age-old drive to spiritual purity to which military virtue is anathema. What Sowell condemns as the perverse “trashing” of American achievements is the sense of oneself as “above” ordinary human enthusiasms and identifications, as rising toward a higher consciousness—just as earlier, religious ascetics understood themselves as rising above the City of Man through their commitment to the City of God.

To borrow from Nietzsche, an inextinguishable drunkenness is being concealed behind what gets represented as a mere love of reality. It is this, not disembodied intellectual rigor, that impels some liberals to highlight America’s historical moral failings at the expense of its moral successes, to arbitrarily judge America’s record by a standard higher than is applied to other nations, and higher than the history of the human race suggests is reasonable. This is why conservatives feel, with Kahane, that the Left stresses America’s historical moral failings in order to “invalidate any aspect of your culture” any time it chooses.¹²⁹ That culture must be invalidated because it is incompatible with the hero-system which the elites are seeking to institutionalize as the “thoughtful” perspective. And this is why conservatives see “thoughtfulness” as yet another weapon in the arsenal of liberal ideology.

Why, asks Horowitz, did Temple University’s incoming freshman reading assignment emphasize the internment of Japanese-Americans during WW II while ignoring the great moral achievements of “the greatest generation,” like “rescuing Asia from the horrors of Japanese imperialism and military occupation, establishing democracy in Japan”? Aren’t these victories just as important as Japanese internment when it comes to “understanding citizenship,” the ostensible purpose of the reading requirement?¹³⁰ Scientific honesty and Enlightenment alone cannot answer this question. The canons of academic professionalism can dictate the historian’s standards of evidence. But they cannot dictate whether that historian chooses to investigate—or whether students are asked to learn of—heretofore undocumented chapters in the mistreatment of Japanese-American internees or heretofore undocumented chapters in the heroism of American marines. The latter can be disparaged as “tribalistic,” but this is a value judgment which does not directly follow from any canons of expertise or professionalism except insofar as these have themselves become imbued with an ideological meaning, which is precisely what conservatives suspect.

¹²⁹David Kahane, *Rules for Radical Conservatives: Beating the Left at Its Own Game to Take Back America* (Ballantine Books, 2010), pg. 104; *Ibid.*, pg. 132 (the Left has “made America’s entire history hostage to the legacy of slavery”).

¹³⁰ David Horowitz and Jacob Laskin, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America’s Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), pg. 172.

An emphasis on the mistreatment of Japanese-Americans might qualify as the most scientifically objective emphasis if we first assumed that most Americans are still living in a John Wayne movie, that they are half-savage relics of past time who must, in their ignorance and parochialism, be enlightened about such things as slavery, segregation, or aggression against Native Americans. Highlighting these could then be defended as necessary for a more complete view of history. But if most Americans are well aware of these episodes, then the principles of scientific honesty through which this emphasis is defended would have to be viewed as only the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of that honesty, a deceptive veneer through which to push anti-American feeling under the cover of respect for “the facts.”

As with the Smithsonian memorandum, scientific objectivity serves as a *posture*. What presents itself as mere realism, as sober reconciliation to the facts disguises the “inextinguishable drunkenness” of a hero-system predicated on hostility to a certain range of human virtues—like military virtues—that are incongruous with a religiously bequeathed, historically inherited asceticism. A more “critical” view of American history is being advanced, not to rectify ignorance, but to delegitimize a certain range of all-too-human enthusiasms. As judged by the elites’ secularized asceticism, these emotions must be discounted as mere escapism, a failure to achieve a “higher consciousness” that is the transcendence of those enthusiasms. Liberals may position themselves as Galilean truth-seekers whose conscience compels them to reveal truths from which others shirk. But the guise of opposing all mythology is merely the deceptive and self-deceptive mimicry of that opposition, the mechanism through which a *spiritual* ideal is being promoted. Sowell writes that those who hold the vision of the anointed are “defending their souls.” But as understood within the mutation counter-narrative, what they are defending is a particular kind of *consciousness*, not a generic ego-investment but a *specific historical legacy* which liberalism seeks to institute socially. And as in our first example, the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of scientific disengagement can beget a self-fulfilling prophesy, as the surreptitious imposition of a hero-system provokes a “tribalistic” reaction by contrast with which liberals’ claims to disengaged objectivity seems socially vindicated. In this way does liberalism *create* the very realities it purports to describe—as all hero-systems must.

* * *

Most conservatives do not have any well thought out philosophies of modernity. Nevertheless, the core of their claims of cultural oppression consists in an *intuitive* sense that the stance of dispassionate scientific disengagement through which liberals announce their moral and cognitive superiority is a kind of social performance, a deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of that disengagement. If

Goldberg should find himself infuriated at liberals' "smug assertions that they are simply pragmatists, fact finders, and empiricists who are clearheaded as to 'what works,'" this is in reaction to liberals' claims to strategic agency, their presumption that they have by virtue of that achievement transcended the background structures of significance to which conservatives remain beholden. The liberal elites view themselves as liberated from "certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge," that continue to compromise conservatives. But conservatives are persuaded that what liberals *mistake for their rationalistic transcendence of all hero-systems is in fact the expression of a particular hero-system*, and that this disingenuousness has permitted liberalism to accrue an undeserved social prestige. In seeking to expose the truth underneath all the lies, they are ultimately seeking to *expose liberals' ideals of disengagement as surreptitious forms of engagement*, to expose how the shapes which these ideals assume in concrete practice are surreptitiously informed by a hero-system.

Nunberg writes that "[o]n the face of things, the contention that radical secularists have a 'secret plan' to eradicate Christianity so they can 'pass secular progressive programs like legalization of narcotics, euthanasia, abortion at will [and] gay marriage'—as Bill O'Reilly believes—is "on a par with the black-U.N. helicopter fantasies of the fruitcake right."¹³¹ And indeed, conservative claims of cultural oppression can blur the line between mainstream conservatism and the lunatic fringe. But while this "black U.N. helicopter interpretation" of conservative claims of cultural oppression is easily discredited, these claims can also be understood as *attacks on the dominant self-understanding of modernity* and, through this, on the self-understanding of liberals, the vanguards of modernity. Coulter accuses that liberals "masquerade as rationalists, adopting a sneering tone of scientific sophistication, which is a little like being condescended to by a tarot card reader,"¹³² which liberals will reflexively dismiss as an empty ad hominem. And the charge is indeed just that when taken on its terms. But understood in the broader intellectual context I've described, Coulter is just translating MacIntyre's suspicions about deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry into a language more suitable for popular consumption. If liberals are not innocents but guilty, as Coulter insists, then this is precisely what they are guilty of. There is, we might say, a literalist or "fundamentalist" interpretation of conservative claims of cultural oppression that is easily dismissed as fantastic. But these claims also admit of a more sophisticated hermeneutic. Understood on this deeper level, they are *symbols* for truths revealed by the mutation counter-narrative.

What liberals dismiss as an arbitrary assortment of ad hominem attacks has a definite structure the purpose of which is to *expose liberalism as a hero-system*. This objective can explain, not only attacks

¹³¹ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 161.

¹³² Ann Coulter, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), pg. 3.

on the “secular counter-church of liberalism,” but also a whole gamut of issues that are ostensibly unrelated to religion. It is this imperative that unifies what Frank dismisses as that “curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs about the world,” imbuing what Nunberg describes as the right’s “overlapping set of stories” with the narrative coherence that it appears to enjoy. Whatever the ostensible grievance, conservative claims of cultural oppression attempt to articulate liberalism as a self-contradiction, as a heroic repudiation of the heroic that avails itself of the same satisfactions of which it would deprive others. These claims all seek to in one way or another recast liberals’ presumption to moral and intellectual superiority as manifestations of a system of meaning-preservation through which to accrue feelings of cosmic specialness. Dismiss the unreflective mores of conservatives though they will, liberals are beholden to their own analogues thereof, which are just better concealed from view.

Conservatives see symmetry where liberals see asymmetry because they are as relative pre-moderns better attuned to the pre-modern residuum than are liberals. They see sectarian allegiance where liberals see dispassionate objectivity because they sense intuitively that human agency is extended over and permeated by a field of social meanings. And so what liberals hold out as the superior empirical lucidity of an autonomous intellect, conservatives see as the outgrowth, not of individual courage, but of a particular culture that is no more self-transparent than their own. The accusations of crypto-fascism, racism, aristocracy, and so forth are all articulations of this basic intuition, their sense that the naturalistic disengagement of liberals is anchored in something more primordial. What conservative and their Right Eclecticism ultimately seek to “subdue” in liberalism is its presumptions to the transcendence of all hero-systems—the one great lie from which all the smaller ones are spawned.

Selya Benhabib writes that contemporary Western liberal democracies “are being challenged by groups who insist upon their unassimilatable difference and who want to use their experience of alterity to demystify the rationalist and identitary illusions of these liberal democracies.”¹³³ And my argument here is that conservative claims of cultural oppression belong to precisely this tradition. The Right has become the Left in order to accuse the Left of having become the Right because conservative claims of cultural oppression issue a challenge that essentially mirrors the one that multiculturalists have always leveled against the “bourgeois West.” The claimants’ challenge is not to liberal democracy as such but to the Left’s interpretation of what its ideals properly consist in, which they believe rests on a parochial understanding of fully realized human nature in whose light they have been unfairly judged.

¹³³ Selya Benhabib, “Introduction,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pg. 5.

These claims' ad hominem flavor should come as no surprise, and would indeed possess a latent theoretical content, if their ultimate subject matter is *human agency*; if they are, at their base, *animated by resentment toward what conservatives discern to be liberals' presumptions to a superior, more self-transparent and more self-regulating form of that agency*. These are the "rationalist and identity illusions" that must forever grate against conservative "alterity." Conservatives' conviction that Left and Right are divided by "indelible psychological differences," as Nunberg says, reflects just these intuitions, conservatives' bedrock conviction that the liberal mind has been shaped by a distinctive ethos that is anathema to their own. If liberal conservaphobia bears a legitimate analogy to the more widely recognized bigotries of racism, sexism, and homophobia, this is because the stakes of political disagreement are something more primordial than mere ideas. And these are the level of agency which political interlocutors are willing to recognize in one another.

Beyond being a form of social commentary, conservative claims of cultural oppression are also a social practice. They are not simply a response to social reality, but also an effort to shape it. Claiming cultural oppression is first and foremost something that one *does*. While these claims will be articulated through whatever facts and arguments may be available, their ultimate objective is not to *describe* external reality but to *transform* it, to compel liberals to relinquish their claims to a superior, more self-transparent and self-regulating form agency. This is why Codevilla can conclude that the "Country Class" of ordinary Americans now has no choice but "to attack the Ruling Class' fundamental claims to its superior intellect and morality in ways that dispirit the target and hearten one's own."¹³⁴ If conservative claimants of cultural oppression must "dispirit" their targets, this is in an effort to regulate social meaning in their own favor, to erode the social plausibility of a hero-system that threatens their own. The culture wars are not a clash of ideas but a Nietzschean struggle between different forms of life who employ a clash of ideas to perpetuate the social meanings and practices that sustain their own self-understandings, their Beckerean amoebas, while seeking to disconfirm those that sustain antithetical identities.

Goldberg can accuse liberals of seeking to have their "metaphysics confirmed in every human interaction and encounter" because the metaphysics in question consists in the secularized asceticism out of which the modern liberal identity developed. Conservatives' often conspiratorial-sounding allegations about the cunning machinations of an omnipresent, nearly omnipotent elite always working "behind the scenes" to strip them of their very agency are ultimately the *anthropomorphization* of the intuition that the ideal of the modern free subject is embedded in a hero-system that is not acknowledged in its official

¹³⁴ Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Ruling Class: How They Corrupted America and What We Can Do About It* (Beauford Books 2010), pg. 78.

self-conception, and that to accept liberalism is therefore to accept much more than just a set of discrete policy prescriptions. If some African-Americans anthropomorphized structural racism as a government conspiracy in infest inner city neighborhoods with narcotics, so conservative claims of cultural oppression anthropomorphize *the spiritual dimension of modern subjectivity* as the sundry depredations of privileged elites. As I shall later demonstrate in considerable detail, not only the discourse of crypto-theocracy, but also that of crypto-fascism, crypto-aristocracy, crypto-conservatism, and so on all represent partial frameworks for the articulation of this spiritual dimension.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression may appear unhinged. But as I have already suggested, this appearance is the predictable result of the claimants' historical predicament, which allows them to sense deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry but does not allow them to understand in what exactly this consists. Like Kafka's K. in *The Trial*, conservatives can only access an assortment of "leaks" about the true nature of their oppression—like the Smithsonian memorandum—without ever receiving a more general accounting, encountering only a stealth and subterfuge that is exposed to view only obliquely in deniable undertones, patterns, and inconsistencies. It is this dilemma, itself an aspect of their cultural oppression, that yields the conspiratorial flights of fancy. And this is why even these flights of fancy have a social meaning and a philosophical significance. Though generally inaccurate as descriptions of the present-day intentions of specific liberals, conservative claims of cultural oppression are meaningful as symbolic references to the "old loves" that liberals will not acknowledge, structural forces that may portend as yet greater cultural oppression down the road. Conservatives endlessly convoluted stories are at their core distorted interpretations of this fundamental truth, and so distortions with a heretofore undisclosed logic. For it is this undisclosed logic that I am here endeavoring to disclose.

It is only by ascending to this kind of "high theory" that the ostensible confusions of conservative claims of cultural oppression become resolved. And just as the high theory provides an intellectually serious construal of even the most facially vapid of these claims, so these claims provide the tangible human immediacy that would concretize the high theory. Certainly, these claims need not be subsumed within the all-encompassing theoretical framework I am proposing before they may be assessed individually. And given their sheer variety, a less ambitious approach may seem in order. But while conservative claims of cultural oppression can be addressed on their own terms and in isolation, it seems that the stupefaction with which liberals greet them is of a very general nature, signaling bemusement and incredulity before an entire mindset rather than mere disagreements with specific arguments. It is therefore appropriate to address that stupefaction at the highest level of generality, whatever the risks of such an enterprise.

6. The Meta-Equal Protection Problem

A fuller development of this high theory will have to await a more comprehensive exposition of the mutation counter-narrative, which I will undertake in the next chapter. But we can already take some preliminary glances at its implications. As we shall now see, this theory illuminates conservatives' visceral sense that the liberal elites do not play by the same rules as everyone else, that they level demands on the wider society that they are unprepared to impose on themselves. In every case, it is the ethos of self-control and self-reflexivity that allows liberals to engage in the deceptive and self-deceptive mimicry of the transcendence of all hero-systems. And in every case, conservative claimants of cultural oppression seek to expose what this ethos actually *does* in concrete practice, which is to uphold a culture that validates liberals' claims to moral and cognitive superiority at the expense of conservatives.

Lakoff argues that conservatives could have succeeded in moving the general mood of the country to the right because most Americans are "biconceptuals" who are not wholly dominated by either Strict Father or Nurturant Parent morality. In these cases, the two moralities act upon each other through the mechanism of "mutual inhibition," so that each succeeds in becoming neutrally activated in some realms of life but not others, where it is neurally inhibited by its antagonist.¹³⁵ Progressive and conservative modes of thought are general synaptic structures that compete to be concretely instantiated in particular spheres of concern and achieve that end to the extent they succeed in neurally binding a sphere to the general conceptual scaffolding they provide.¹³⁶ This is why one can be a foreign policy hawk yet left-of-center on domestic issues. There is no "centrist" morality because a centrist is merely a biconceptual in whom the two systems have variously established themselves in roughly equal proportion, or in whom the two systems operate only on a general level without having securely colonized the synaptic connections associated with particular spheres—which is precisely why centrists may find themselves going "back and forth" on issues.¹³⁷ It is this indeterminacy, argues Lakoff, that has allowed conservatives to develop a set of political metaphors that strengthen conservative neural bindings while weakening liberal ones, gradually nudging biconceptuals to the Right until Strict Father morality came to feel like the natural way to frame issues..

Just as one might be biconceptual as between different spheres of political concern, so one might also be biconceptual as between politics in general and other realms of life. Someone might embrace a

¹³⁵ George Lakoff: *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (Viking, 2008), pg. 70-71.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 113.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 109.

liberal “Nurturant Parent” morality in his politics and yet be a Strict father in private family life, or vice versa. He might also be a Nurturant Parent politically and yet be a conservative Strict Father in his professional life. This constellation of attitudes, notes Lakoff, appears to describe many academics, who are politically liberal but for whom “academic scholarship is conceptualized metaphorically as a version of Strict Father morality.”¹³⁸ With scholarly life having been neurally bound by that morality, it follows that “[t]here are intellectual authorities who maintain strict standards for the conduct of scholarly research and for reporting on such research,” that “[i]t is unscholarly for someone to violate those standards,” and, therefore, that “[y]oung scholars require a rigorous training to learn to meet those scholarly standards.”¹³⁹

So much may appear like incontrovertible, and thoroughly apolitical common sense. But the suggestion is that the bare practice of scholarship has a political meaning apart from its particular contents and aims, because the way it is undertaken already moralizes intellectual life in the same way the Strict Father system moralizes political life. This moralization expresses itself metaphorically in such unstated precepts as a “Mature Scholars Are Strict Fathers,” “Intellectual Authority is Moral Authority,” “Scholarliness is Morality,” “Unscholarliness is Immorality,” “Scholarly Rigor is Moral Strength,” “Lack of Scholarly Rigor is Moral Weakness,” “Scholarly Discipline is Moral Discipline,” and “Scholarly Standards are Moral Standards.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, scholarliness would come to mean something very different were it guided by Nurturant Parent morality, which would be more concerned to nurture the intellect than to discipline it. But as it stands, these temperamentally conservative academics are just as beholden to “Moral Order” in their professional lives as are conservatives in their politics. They are both “pre-modern” in this sense, just in different spheres.

This is illustrated in Bourdieu’s analysis of academic respectability, which he likens to the medieval ordinances regulating guilds¹⁴¹:

There is no acknowledged master who does not recognize a master and, through him, the intellectual magistrature of the sacred college of masters who acknowledge him. In short, there is no master who does not recognize the value of the institution and institutional values which are all rooted in the institutionalized refusal of any non-institutional thought, in the exaltation of academic ‘reliability’, that instrument of normalization which has all appearances on its side, those of learning and those of morality, although it is often only the instrument of the transformation of individual and collective limits into the choice of scientific virtuousness.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, pg. 297.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 296.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 297.

¹⁴¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford University Press, 1988), pg. 95.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pg. 95.

“Reliability” is to the scholar what “moral order” is to the conservative model citizen, an ideological rather than empirical concept. Also like moral order writ large, this ideology marks out a “sanctioned path” departure from which is understood to be the beginnings of a slippery slope into a kind of moral dissoluteness. Bourdieu explains:

In fact, since the positions of power are hierarchized and separated in time, reproduction of the hierarchy presupposes a respect for distances, that is respect for the *order of succession*. It is this very order which threatens the *celeritas* of those who want to ‘cut corners’ (for example, by importing into the university field properties or powers acquired on other terrains), as against *gravitas*, the healthy slowness which people like to feel is in itself a guarantee of reliability (in writing a thesis, for instance) and which is really the most authentic proof of *obsequium*, unconditional respect for the fundamental principles of the established order.¹⁴³

Gravitas will be defended as a desideratum of academic professionalism, and there is indeed something commonsensically plausible about that “healthy slowness which people like to feel is in itself a guarantee of reliability.” But Bourdieu’s suggestion here is that the *gravitas* through which this conviction gets signaled is a culturally parochial ethos whose dictates cannot be accepted at face value. For *gravitas* is in fact an affirmation of the academic model citizen’s assumptions about differential superiority and inferiority—proof that he will not veer off of sanctioned paths and call the basic purposes that govern other academics’ lives into question. Put another way, “the fundamental principles of the established order” are ultimately the expression of a hero-system. It is not considered reflections on the timeless essence of intellectual rigor that yield scholarly *gravitas* but, on the contrary, the role played by *gravitas* in upholding the identities of scholars that yields its rationalizing principles. If *gravitas* is “really the most authentic proof of *obsequium*,” this is because it is by virtue of, and in exchange for, that *obsequium*—both individual and collective—that the scholar earns his or her “feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning.”

Scholarly notions of reliability are political not only in that they bear a structural analogy to the Strict Father morality of conservatives, but also in that this analogy engenders a certain *inequality* between conservatives and those leftists who are so constituted as to be “right-wing” in their professional endeavors but not elsewhere. For this is precisely what describes the liberal elites, who can indulge their own authoritarian hierarchies in ways that may not be permitted to conservatives. Remarking on Duke’s success in establishing itself as the leader of literary deconstruction, one English professor there proclaimed that “[w]e are hot and everyone knows that.” No one else in the country “can boast of the line-up of home run hitters that we’ve now got here.” Another professor observed “We are the

¹⁴³ Ibid., pg. 87.

mainstream—what we are doing here is what most of the best colleges do, or aspire to do.”¹⁴⁴ And Stanley Fish, the movement’s standard-bearer, noted that, with the literary critic no longer being subordinated to his text as its humble servant, “[p]erhaps the greatest gain that falls to us...is a greatly enhanced sense of the importance of our activities.”¹⁴⁵ But this greatly enhanced sense of self-importance is precisely what the liberal elites attack in conservatives. Secure in their professional enclaves, the liberal elites are free to dictate what constitutes “the mainstream” and thereby define the model citizens who uphold it. But conservatives whose Strict Father morality must be expressed in the usual public channels will find themselves accused of intolerance or discrimination when they attempt the very same in the only way their particular neural bindings permit. Those whose Strict Father morality is synaptically encoded in the conventional way, through allegiance to traditional morality, the free market, or law and order find themselves the targets of legal intervention and/or cultural assault. But those whose neural bindings instantiate the very same morality in a less public fashion are insulated from these threats. Their “bigoted clauses” and fears of social contagion simply pass under the cultural radar screen undetected, giving them an unearned sense of moral superiority over conservatives, whose bigoted clauses are on full public display.

As we observed in Chapter 2, Justice Scalia argued in *Romer v. Evans* that the Court’s decision to invalidate Colorado’s Amendment 2—designed to preempt local laws prohibiting anti-gay discrimination—betrayed the “law-school view of what ‘prejudices’ must be stamped out.” For it ratified a state of affairs in which the “Templars,” or liberal elites, can indulge their own arbitrary prejudices in employment decisions while preventing the “villeins,” or ordinary Americans, from doing the same. Seen in this light, the equal protection problem posed by *Romer* wasn’t between gays and straights, but between Templars and villeins. It concerned, not protection against prejudice, but protection of the right to indulge prejudice. I shall designate this *the meta-equal protection problem*, addressing as it does not the victims of prejudice but its bearers, the prejudicial privileging of some prejudices over others. And the meta-equal protection violation discerned in conservative claims of cultural oppression is that liberals can wield the power of the state and other powerful social institutions to attack *other people’s* illiberal hierarchies while their own remain hidden from view, insulated from what would be analogous forms of criticism, regulation, and interference.

¹⁴⁴ Qt. in Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free, 1991), pg. 159.

¹⁴⁵ Qt. in *Ibid.*, pg. 180.

This is the *actual* difference between “modern” liberals and “pre-modern” conservatives, the essential core of the liberal privilege that aggrieves the latter. Nietzsche writes that “[a]lmost everything we call ‘higher culture’ is based on the spiritualization of *cruelty*, on its becoming more profound.”¹⁴⁶ Cruelty has merely “become more refined,” for while its older forms “offend the new taste,” the “art of wounding and torturing others with words and looks reaches its supreme development in times of corruption.”¹⁴⁷ Liberalism is such a “higher culture,” and this is what permits liberals to *sublimate, intellectualize, and etherealize* the authoritarian impulses that conservatives must express more crudely, in ways more visible to the naked eye. Borrowing from anthropologist Robert Lowie, Becker notes that while “primitive man was a natural peacock, so open was he in self-display and self-glorification,” we “play the same game, only not as openly.”¹⁴⁸ Liberals and conservatives also “play the same game.” If conservatives are somehow “primitive,” as liberals indeed believe, this is because their hero-systems are less subtle, and therefore less disguised, than those of the Left. For this disguising is precisely what the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity enables liberals to do. It allows them to spiritualize all the impulses they would prefer to associate with conservatives and thereby indulge them under a veneer of cultural, political, and historical sophistication.

For example, Shelby Steele argues that affirmative action functions as an absolution ritual through which whites seek expiation for America’s original sin of racism from militant black leaders, who have positioned themselves as father-confessors imbued with the power to confer redemption in exchange for suitable political concessions.¹⁴⁹ Such rituals are to be expected when “[r]ace is an area in which Americans have been conditioned by a history of painful conflict into a rigid and unforgiving propriety.”¹⁵⁰ Since the 1950s, argues Steele, “[r]ace simply replaced sex as the primary focus of America’s moral seriousness.”¹⁵¹ The conservative intuition is thus that liberals’ moral seriousness about race recapitulates the same kinds of irrationalities that liberals see in traditionalists’ moral seriousness about sex. The Victorians are reputed to have lived under the fear that reference to a table leg risked eliciting the thought of the female limb and, through this, male lust. But if moral traditionalists have sexual hang-ups, then enlightened liberals have racial hang-ups. For liberal race policy—multiculturalism, affirmative action,

¹⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pg. 158 (Sec. 229).

¹⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books 1974), pg. 97 (Sec. 23).

¹⁴⁸ Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, pg. 70.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pg.

¹⁵⁰ Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character* (St. Martin’s Press, 1990), pg. x.

¹⁵¹ Shelby Steele, *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006), pg. 6.

etc.—has become a “sanctioned path,” as Lakoff says, any deviation from which is understood to be an invitation to racist contagion. With “social justice” being just a secularized morality of sin and redemption, anything which so much as intimates a conservative view on race will be treated as a violation of sacred taboo, even when it can be defended on non-racist grounds. Liberalism being a hero-system, a “sanctioned path,” even minor violations of anti-racist mores can initiate a downward spiral of sin, which must therefore be cut off at its roots. Liberals too are susceptible to “vague premonitions or erosion or unraveling,” which may be provoked by even the slightest softening of anti-racist inhibition. If conservatives refuse to accept liberal race discourse at face value, this is because they sense that the specter of “unconscious racism” is just a way to rationalize this race-puritanism as sophisticated sociological insight. Hence Kimball’s characterization of liberal race discourse as offering opportunities to “indulge in...ecstasies of intellectualized liberal shame.”¹⁵² Far from being the product of cautious, dispassionate argument, this discourse is an invitation to bask in emotions that would be decried as unsophisticated and retrograde if expressed in less intellectualized contexts.

Conservatives are “anti-intellectual” because intellectualism helps perpetuate the meta-equal protection problem, allowing liberals to indulge in the very vices for which they castigate conservatives. Kimball notes the paradox that deconstructionist radicals should hold themselves out as anti-traditionalist and anti-bourgeois while simultaneously “judg[ing] every product of the human spirit by the degree of ‘virtue’ it exhibits,”—virtue having been defined by Marxism, feminism, or whatever the preferred school of thought happens to be. This “extraordinary, if perverted, moralism” permits the radicals a high sense of purpose. But it is nothing for which they are ever held to account, because the “jargon of deconstruction, post-structuralism, and kindred Continental imports” allows “cutting edge” academics “to indulge their moralism to the hilt while at the same time appearing to be intellectually sophisticated.”¹⁵³ As with the anti-American school of historians and history teachers, some very primordial emotions are being pushed under the cover of epistemological sophistication, which is therefore less sophisticated than it appears. The liberal elites believe they have cast off the illusory teleology of a benighted past. But borrowing from philosopher David Stone, Kimball concludes that supposedly “transgressive academics” have succumbed to “cognitive Calvinism”: “Just as Calvinists, convinced of the total depravity of human nature, believe that ‘if an impulse is one of ours, it is bad *because* it is one of ours,’ so anti-foundationalist academics believe that ‘any knowledge we have could not be the real thing, *because* we have it.’”¹⁵⁴ Here

¹⁵² Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), pg. 36.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg. xv-xvi.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 187-88

is the meta-equal protection problem once again. Whatever traces of traditional religious Calvinism continues to exist among benighted conservatives will be ridiculed as primitive superstition, the product of some unacknowledged psychic conflict. But the “transgressive” academics of the Left can indulge intellectualized iterations of the same superstition while holding themselves out as sophisticated skeptics free of moral and religious dogma. They are “cutting edge,” not in their basic sensibilities, but only in the creativity with which those sensibilities have been intellectualized and sublimated—and therefore disguised.

Not all liberal elites are cognitive Calvinists, of course. But cognitive Calvinism is merely one illustration of conservatives’ animating suspicion that the elites are repositories of one or another cluster of “old loves” whose cruder, more overt analogues the Left would dismiss as benighted and retrograde. If conservatives are the half-savage relics of past times, then liberals are what Nietzsche decries as the “men of the present”:

Truly, you could wear no better masks than your own faces, you men of the present! Who could – *recognize* you!

Written over with the signs of the past and these signs overdaubed with new signs: thus have you hidden yourselves well from all interpreters of signs!

And if one tests your virility, one finds only sterility! You seem to be baked from colours and scraps of paper glued together.

All ages and all people gaze motley out of your veils; all customs and all beliefs speak motley out of your gestures.¹⁵⁵

The convolutedness of conservative claims of cultural oppression is merely the mirror-image of this convolutedness, the mirror-image of the motley “signs of the past” that have been chaotically weaved into the tapestry of the modern liberal identity. These signs are not readily discernible by the naked eye because they have been sedimented in, expressing themselves obliquely and surreptitiously through, the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity—which sublimates and intellectualizes all the “signs of the past” that liberals detect in conservatives. This is what allows liberals to be both post-modern and highly moralistic. For the pretense of disengagement is applied selectively to impugn conservative moralism as immature while upholding liberal moralism as intellectual sophistication. Having naturalized liberalism as what remains upon sloughing off the illusions of the past, the liberal elites remain oblivious to this selectivity. And this is what the Right Eclecticism of conservative claimants of cultural oppression wish to call to their attention.

¹⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), pg. 142.

Will Kymlicka argues that Rawls's political liberalism, which demands that we embrace a political conception of the person predicated on autonomy while allowing us to embrace communitarian ideals in our non-public identities, is ultimately untenable. For it cannot explain "why anyone would accept the ideal of autonomy in political contexts unless they also accepted it more generally." If members of a religious community feel they are unable to "step back" from commitments that they feel are constitutive of their identities, then how can they be expected to embrace a political conception of the person that presupposes this ability?¹⁵⁶ The spirit of disengaged reflexivity being foreign to their non-public identities, it seems psychologically unrealistic to expect them to adopt it in their public ones. The answer to Kymlicka's challenge is that communitarians could accept a political conception of the person premised on autonomy if 1) their own hero-system was not undermined by that conception, because it was somehow immune to whatever legislation and cultural memes the conception produced, and 2) their hero-system also involved the deceptive a self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of the ideal of autonomous self-determination, a mimicry that would conceal the existence of a hero-system, and therefore the dissonance between their private and public commitments. As we have already begun to see, liberals enjoy the privilege of satisfying both these conditions, and it is precisely this that allows them to be liberal.

From a historical perspective, it is liberalism, and not its enemies, that must appear downright mysterious. How does liberalism explain the fact that moral and personal eccentricity has only occasionally been tolerated in human societies? Social conservatives are merely carrying on the historically dominant tradition, after all. Seen in this context, the question is not how so many people could have come to concern themselves with the "enforcement of morals"—when this means regulating unobtrusive conduct that does not result in tangible harms—but how anyone could have become indifferent to it. The explanation offered by the subtraction account is that Western and Western-style liberals have realized in themselves the "psychological foundations of liberalism," overcoming the intolerance, self-righteousness, and superstitions of an earlier age. Having cast off pre-modern temptations, they have relinquished what Nussbaum calls "grandiose demands for omnipotence and completeness." Resigning themselves to their animal neediness and vulnerability, they need no longer project these onto some designated pariah and scapegoat. The *other* explanation, however, is that liberals can embrace tolerance as a political value only because it does not undermine their hero-systems, which are embedded in institutional enclaves rather than in broader public space. Liberals have not

¹⁵⁶ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pg. 159-60.

transcended the pre-modern “[public] order which everyone lives” but merely *privatized* it, as the secure anchor that allows them to assume a stance of naturalistic lucidity vis-à-vis the wider society. Liberal tolerance is facilitated by liberal privilege, not liberal virtue.

It is this privilege that animates the profusion of conservative grievances highlighting the existence of discrete liberal elite enclaves, like academia, the media, Hollywood, and so forth that are all “out of touch” with the sensibilities of the ordinary American. Lasch writes:

The culture wars that have convulsed America since the sixties are best understood as a form of class warfare, in which an enlightened elite (as it thinks of itself) seeks not so much to impose its values on the majority (a majority perceived as incorrigibly racist, sexist, provincial, and xenophobic), much less to persuade the majority by means of rational public debate, as to create parallel or ‘alternative’ institutions in which it will no longer be necessary to confront the unenlightened at all.¹⁵⁷

Though Lasch downplays the elites’ will to impose their values, he correctly emphasizes the origin of the meta-equal protection problem, which is the (comparatively) self-contained nature of the elites’ hero-systems. The elites can be liberal vis-à-vis most social issues, condemning the prejudice and narrowness of others, because their liberalism need never be extended into the specific social and professional milieus in which their own identities are rooted. Their hero-systems have been compressed into their professionalism, where they are immune to the “reality slippage” with which liberalism afflicts the ordinary American. The liberal elites adopt a posture of naturalistic lucidity vis-à-vis issues like gay rights—with Martha Nussbaum tracing opposition to them to “narcissistic fear and aggression” awoken by “anxiety about change that eludes control, and the loss of control over cherished values.”¹⁵⁸ But if fear, aggression, and anxiety seem like the features of a distinctively conservative psychology, this is only because liberals’ own cherished values are much better protected, experienced as just the air they breathe.

Conservatives have lynx eyes for whatever “narcissistic fear and aggression” is betrayed by liberals—in academia, Hollywood, the media, and so forth—because what Frank dismisses as liberals’ “personal tastes and pretensions” has *political* significance in the context of the meta-equal protection problem. For liberals’ personal tastes and pretensions are the functional analogues of the narcissistic fear and aggression that conservatives express openly and publicly, and so proof that liberals lack the disengaged self-possession which they histrionically mimic. Thus, Coulter notes that former Harvard president Larry’s Summers’s public speculations that men and women might have different innate

¹⁵⁷ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), pgs. 20-21.

¹⁵⁸ Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, pg. 260.

potentials at the highest levels of scientific research “led to fainting spells by women in attendance,” with one female biology professor confessing that she had to leave the room because she otherwise “would’ve either blacked out or thrown up.” Could anyone, Coulter asks, “imagine evangelicals behaving this way if someone mentioned evolution?”¹⁵⁹ Academic elites, then, are not inherently more rational and temperate than evangelical Christians. They are merely privileged to inhabit environments that ordinarily shield them from whatever provocations might expose their latent irrationality, might expose the fragility of *their* hero-systems—in this case feminism—at which point the disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity breaks down. Summers was forced to step down as president of Harvard because the social meaning of his remarks was to withdraw this immunity, to deprive feminists of the control which they customarily wield over their cultural environs. Being culturally oppressed, evangelicals are not accustomed to this control, which is why they do not react in like manner to discussions of evolution. In speculating as he did, Summers failed to uphold the order in which everyone lives, provoking the “vague premonitions of erosion or unraveling” that liberals would prefer to associate with evangelical Christians rather than with Harvard professors. And this association was only possible because liberalism is merely the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of the transcendence of all hero-systems.

As we saw, Smith would dismiss the “artificial” or “technical” conception of harm preferred by liberals as a sleight-of-hand. And liberals, we also saw, believe that this disingenuousness is just a corrective to the sleight-of-hand that has already been perpetuated by conservatives’ everyday, subject-oriented conception of harm, which being anthropocentric through and through reifies private offense as a public interest. But the conservative can in turn retort that this liberal rebuttal to the sleight-of-hand accusation is only a second-order sleight-of-hand. Notwithstanding their dismissive indignation, liberals take psychic and communal harms very seriously when they happen to bear on their own identities, as the Summers affair proved. This is why they “accentuate” some social meanings and “nihilate” others. Liberals are engaged only in the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of the psychological self-possession they believe is lacking in conservatives. And the dismissive indignation and outraged incredulity with which the liberals greet the latter’s claims of cultural oppression is simply the propaganda through which the mimicry is concealed.

¹⁵⁹ Coulter, *Godless*, pgs. 182-83.

Susan Jacoby observes that the “slick, media-savvy right-wingers” who promote intelligent design at the Discovery Institute “constantly compare their contrarian faith-based researchers with once scorned geniuses like Copernicus and Galileo—a contention conveniently ignoring the fact that the Catholic Church, not other seekers of scientific truth, was the source of opposition to the heliocentric theory of the solar system.”¹⁶⁰ But this picture of a perennial struggle between small-minded religious dogmatists and courageous secular truth-seekers is for conservatives just the self-serving mythology of the liberal elites. Rejecting the conventional wisdom that Galileo was the target of religious hostility to secular knowledge, Goldberg endorses Robert Nisbet’s revisionary analysis:

The principal truth to be drawn from Galileo story is less dramatic than the myth, but far more in accord with the emotions and institutional conditions that prevail today much as they did in the sixteenth century. Rivalry, jealousy, and vindictiveness from other scientists and philosophers were Galileo’s lot, and they are not infrequently the lot of unorthodox minds in modern times. Anyone who believes that inquisitions went out with the triumph of secularism over religion has not paid attention to the records of foundations, federal research agencies, professional societies, and academic institutions, and departments.¹⁶¹

The liberal elites uphold secular modernity as a courageous ascent from darkness to light and condemn conservatives as the relics of a benighted past. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression reject this oppressive dualism and assign the dogmatism and vainglory to the liberal elites themselves. Liberals do not deserve to carry the mantle of Galileo because they are better compared to his secular enemies and rivals, whose ambitions and pretensions pitted them against the uncompromising intellectual freedom for which Galileo has become the preeminent symbol. The Galileo story is just another weapon in the liberal elites’ vast arsenal of cultural propaganda, one more way to obscure liberalism’s deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of the of the disengaged strategic agent who only plans, deduces, and represents. If rivalry, jealousy, and vindictiveness continue to be the lot of unorthodox minds notwithstanding the triumph of secularism, this is because secular values are merely the veneer through which the sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized conservatism of the liberal elites is playing itself out.

The membership of Nisbett’ foundations, federal research agencies, professional societies, and academic institutions and departments was the subject of Alvin Gouldner’s famous *The Future of the Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*. Gouldner argued that the New Class of professional knowledge workers is a highly progressive force on some levels. It has no patience for traditional hierarchies,

¹⁶⁰ Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), pg. 27.

¹⁶¹ Qt. in Jonah Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas* (Sentinel 2012), pg. 11.

including all the privileges of the old class of bourgeois capitalists.¹⁶² The New Class furthermore promotes a linguistic culture, the culture of careful and critical discourse (CCD), that de-authorizes “all speech grounded in traditional societal authority.”¹⁶³ However, Gouldner also stressed that the New Class should not be mistaken for a group of benign technocrats selflessly promoting the public good.¹⁶⁴ For it is only a morally ambiguous “flawed universal class”¹⁶⁵ that is “elitist and self-seeking and uses its special knowledge to advance its own interests and power,”¹⁶⁶ and so “embod[ies] the collective interest but partially and transiently.”¹⁶⁷ While the New Class is hostile to traditional bourgeois interests and values, it is itself a *cultural* bourgeoisie whose interest in freedom is qualified by its need to preserve its own store of cultural capital. It may be egalitarian when critiquing the privileges of the old class, bourgeois conservatives. But it also seeks to maintain its own guild advantages.¹⁶⁸ And so it is disposed to “control the supply and limit the production of its culture, to oppose any group that restricts its control over its culture, and to remove legal or moral restrictions on the uses for which its culture may be purchased.”¹⁶⁹ As the defender of free thought and expression, the New Class opposes all formal censorship. But as a cultural bourgeoisie, it has its own interests to protect, and practices unofficial censorship by limiting discussion to members of its own elite,¹⁷⁰ dismissing those who have not been properly credentialed by it. Even as it subverts old inequalities, the New Class “silently inaugurates a new hierarchy of the knowing, the knowledgeable, the reflexive and insightful.”¹⁷¹

What liberals interpret as conservatives’ primordial anti-intellectualism is better understood as their specific opposition to the New Class culture, to the cognitive privileges which that culture affords its largely liberal membership. The New Class’s cultural capital is ostensibly founded on the culture of careful and critical discourse, which is laudable at face value. But *as a culture* CCD must *take on a life of its own* if it is to fulfill its cultural function as a hero-system. And to this end much of its original libertarian spirit must be sacrificed. Its members seek to be recognized, not merely as having made one or another insightful argument or observation on this or that occasion, but as “the reflexive and insightful”—that is,

¹⁶²Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), pg. 20.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pg. 29.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 6.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 7.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 7.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 8.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 20.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 26.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 82.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 85.

as *the kinds of people* who can and do make such arguments and observations. And this requires that the *concrete meaning and function* of their cultural ideals be appropriately circumscribed, so that what qualifies as “serious” speech is pre-defined according to what are identitarian needs, becoming a framework of debate that cannot itself become the subject of debate—the “mainstream” as the Duke deconstructionist put it. Professionalism, writes Gouldner, is “among the public *ideologies* of the New Class, and is the genteel subversion of the old class by the new.”¹⁷²

Horowitz is discerning this kind of genteel subversion when he observes that the American Association of University Professors believes that “[i]t is not indoctrination for professors to expect students to comprehend ideas and apply knowledge that is accepted as true within a relevant discipline.” But it follows that academics who succeed in enforcing a consensus among departmental peers are under no obligation to acknowledge the existence of opposing views falling outside of that consensus. They need not recognize the entire spectrum of respectable scholarly, scientific, and intellectual opinion but can, through political control of a discipline, establish as bedrock fact what would otherwise be contestable opinion. Radical feminists can then treat the “social construction of gender” as established fact, and need not contend with the neuroscientists across campus who study the biological hard-wiring of gender differences. For these scientists are not members of “the relevant discipline.” Horowitz notes that by this principle one could establish the new field of “Intelligent Design Studies” that treats intelligent design as established fact, because it is universally so considered “within the relevant discipline.”¹⁷³ But unlike liberal academics, Christian fundamentalists do not have the privilege of exalting their own echo chambers as respected academic disciplines. Fundamentalists who ignore what scientists have to say about the evolution of human beings in general are anti-intellectual ignoramuses. But feminists who ignore what scientists have to say about the evolution of sex differences in particular are just being professional, even though their intellectual premises are quite similar. Unlike fundamentalists, radical feminists have been culturally credentialed to disguise their hero-systems as disciplinary rigor. Having embraced the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, they have been credentialed as “the knowing, the knowledgeable, the reflexive and insightful” and so are permitted to invent their own intellectual rules as others are not.

The same is illustrated in Himmelfarb’s attack on liberal social science. Himmelfarb observes that as statistics demonstrating the dysfunctionality of non-traditional family arrangements have become more conclusive, “those who support ‘diverse’ and ‘alternative’ forms of family life have shifted the

¹⁷² Ibid., pg. 19

¹⁷³ Horowitz and Laskin, *One-Party Classroom*, pgs. 282-86.

grounds of their defense, disputing not the statistics themselves but the very use of statistics.” Judith Stacey, a “prominent member of this school,” protests “against social science research that suggests the superiority of the ‘the 1950s family,’” arguing that the “best antidote to this sort of thing...is not necessarily more social science but an immersion in the lived values of actual families.” In the same vein, psychiatrist Robert Coles suggest that “storytelling” rather than statistics “allows for a spaciousness about our day-to-day existence” and that fictional stories mixing “literal truth and imaginative renderings” are as compelling as real stories.¹⁷⁴ But conservative Christians who fuse literal truth with imaginative renderings or formulate social policy on the basis of storytelling and immersion in lived values will be quickly dismissed as quacks and kooks afraid of inconvenient truths. By contrast, liberals are culturally credentialed to indulge these temptations so long as they frame this indulgence as a special sophistication that has moved beyond the blinkered horizons of conventional epistemologies. Those who merely *engage* in storytelling or lived immersion in values lack proper scientific detachment. But those who instead *speak* of them, framing these as “antidotes” to a despised moral conventionality, are intellectual trail blazers. This is how the cultural of careful and critical discourse functions in actual practice.

One feminist defends a “five-phase theory of curricular consciousness” as the standard by which to gauge the progress of teachers-in-training toward proper feminist consciousness, referring to these five phases, as Christina Hoff Sommers puts it, “as if they were as scientifically established as the phases of the moon.”¹⁷⁵ Whereas conservatives may be confronted with inconvenient facts, liberals are privileged to establish their own facts. And this is because their participation in the New Class culture credentials them to disguise the anthropocentric and interpretable as the non-anthropocentric and empirical. The ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity simply envelops their pronouncements in a social aura of scientificity, the purpose of which is to intimidate those who would disrespect the New Class hierarchy. The same could be observed at *Speaking for the Humanities*, a conference convened in the late 1980s in order to respond to the conservative attack on the humanities. The conference announced that “developments in modern thought” have taught academics in the humanities “to ask whether universalist claims do not in fact promote as a norm the concerns of a particular group and set aside as partial or limited those of other groups.” But this, retorts Kimball, implies “that they have some sort of evidence for the highly contentious propositions that they have put forth,” when “in fact the only ‘development’

¹⁷⁴ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures: A Searching Examination of American Society in the Aftermath of Our Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), pg. 50.

¹⁷⁵ Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pg. 121.

they could point to is the rise of a politicized view of education.”¹⁷⁶ The Left, unlike the Right, is privileged to reify its own opinions as impersonal “developments” and thereby cite the mere fact that they hold certain opinions as evidence for their truth. Simply by broadcasting their allegiance to the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, they assure that their intellectual constructions will be given the benefit of the doubt regardless of the evidence.

And this is why liberals, unlike conservatives, are privileged to direct what Berger calls the “thickening objectivity of the institutional world.” Berger writes:

The increasing number and complexity of subuniverses make them increasingly inaccessible to outsiders. They become esoteric enclaves, “hermetically sealed”....to all but those who have been properly initiated into their mysteries. The increasing autonomy of subuniverses makes for special problems of legitimation *vis-à-vis* both outsiders and insiders. The outsiders have to be *kept out*, sometimes even kept ignorant of the existence of the subuniverse. If, however, they are not so ignorant, and if the subuniverse requires various special privileges and recognitions from the larger society, there is the problem of keeping out the outsiders and at the same time having them acknowledge the legitimacy of the procedure. This is done through various techniques of intimidation, rational and irrational propaganda (appealing to the outsiders’ interests and to their emotions), mystification and, generally, the manipulation of prestige symbols.¹⁷⁷

The ultimate prestige symbol, propagated as the subtext of all the derivative ones, is the ideal of the disengaged subject—“that recurrent figure which our civilization aspires to realize, the disembodied ego, the subject who can objectify all being, including his own.” And what conservatives *really mean* by the “liberal culture” is the civilizational framework within which that figure can make his recurrent appearances. If conservative claimants of cultural oppression are “uncivilized,” the “half-savage relics of past times,” this is because they seek, not to *realize* the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, but to *expose* it as a cultural pretense, a mere self-image that is untrue to what human beings, including the liberal elites, are actually like. For it is the prestige of precisely this ideal that allows liberals to play by a different set of rules. The anointed possess “awareness” whilst the benighted lack it, and this is understood to settle the argument ahead of time.

Whatever the specific controversy, conservatives believe that the difference between themselves and liberals is one of accumulated cultural prestige, not intellectual substance. Whether in academia or elsewhere, liberals have the cultural pedigree through which to endow their own arbitrariness with a veneer of intellectual respectability, to articulate that arbitrariness as a newly developed form of intellectual meta-sophistication. And this is why conservatives will not accede to liberals’ claims of intellectual superiority, which they believe are more style than substance. Liberal claims are couched in

¹⁷⁶ Kimball, *Tenured Radicals*, pg. 56.

¹⁷⁷ Berger and Luckman, *Social Construction of Reality*, pg. 87.

the tone and language of scientific expertise and cumulative research. But close inspection reveals this as empty posturing. The posture of a disengaged subjectivity dispassionately surveying “developments in modern thoughts” or the “five phases” of feminist consciousness is only the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of the scientific detachment it advertises, this detachment as a social performance operating in the service of a hero-system.

Sommers observes that feminists compare themselves to once persecuted defenders of the Copernican theory bravely proclaiming truths that others do not wish to hear.¹⁷⁸ And yet this love of truth was nowhere to be found when Sommers charged that the American Association of University Women had conducted tendentious surveys of sexual harassment that failed to distinguish between casual banter, teasing, and genuine harassment. The organization’s executive director could only shake her finger and admonish “Christina, stop it! Do you want to know something? This is the last time you’ll criticize this incredibly prestigious and well-run organization—the American Association of University Women.”¹⁷⁹ The New Class arrogates to itself the prestige of the disengaged subject. But it does not necessarily feel compelled to *implement* its ideals. And this is because it has been culturally credentialed to *embody* them—just as bourgeois conservatives were formerly credentialed to embody the virtues of hard work and moral probity.

This why the New Class’s vices can be viewed as novel, intellectualized iterations of the very vices that it condemns in the old class of bourgeois conservatives. Just as participation in the market economy presupposes acquiescence in the present distribution of financial capital for the old class of the financial bourgeoisie, so the New Class insist that none can acquire new cultural capital without first accepting existing distributions of thereof—which are unofficially shielded from the ostensible norms of CCD. Just as the old class decried any challenge to the economic status quo as incipient socialism or anarchy, so the New Class views any challenge to its own *cognitive* hierarchy as anti-intellectual hostility to expertise and professionalism. The difference is that whereas the financial capital of the old class cannot go unnoticed, the cultural capital of the New Class can be disguised as professionalism, situated in special enclaves where it becomes shielded from outside scrutiny. Most liberals remain surreptitiously conservative in Lakoff’s sense because their illiberal impulses have to go *somewhere*, have to generate some kind of cultural outlet for themselves, however civilized that outlet may appear. This is the fundamental symmetry the vague intuition of which drives conservative claims of cultural oppression inexorably onwards. The ideals of liberalism are always *demarcated*, restricted to certain spheres of consciousness

¹⁷⁸ Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?*, pg. 117.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 186.

while being precluded in others, where our illiberal impulses must in one way or another generate novel recapitulations of the of the hierarchy, authoritarianism, and parochialism that appears to have been superseded elsewhere.

7. Concluding Reflections and Adumbrations

Though other examples could be adduced, the obvious objection is that conservative claims of cultural oppression make a lot of hay out of what are a few relatively insignificant incidents. These incidents may help boost the self-esteem of fundamentalists and other conservatives, but they tell us very little about the overall comparative rationality of liberals. The liberal elites may constitute a “flawed universal class,” as Gouldner charges. But just how flawed are they? Feminists may be wrong to ignore developments in evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. But this lapse is hardly comparable to the conviction that the Earth is 5000 years old. Perhaps “immersion in lived values” of actual families and “imaginative renderings” are just post-hoc stratagems to salvage a failing hypothesis. But those stratagems have at least been openly announced, and this would seem to distinguish them from the hidden closed-circuit logic of many conservatives.

Justice Scalia maintains that the liberal elites do not oppose prejudice as such, but merely impose the “law-school view of what ‘prejudices’ must be stamped out.” But whatever left-wing dogmatism and professional wagon-circling there may be—and people are people—their repercussions appear to have been blown wildly out of proportion. For the villeins’ prejudices seem exponentially more pernicious than the Templars’. What Duke and other literature departments have established as the “mainstream” is relevant only to academic job-seekers rubbing elbows at the conferences of the Modern Language Association. By contrast, the exclusion of gays and other minorities from vital social institutions seems exponentially more consequential. Newly minted J.D.s might occasionally lose out on a job at their top-choice law firm because they wear fur or hate the Chicago Cubs, as Justice Scalia notes in *Romer*. But these unfortunates are not the victims of any systematic discrimination, as are gays and lesbians, and are exceedingly unlikely to encounter the same “prejudice” in their next interview.

However, grievances that conservatives may frame in consequentialist terms—as in worries about the harmful effects of politically correct higher education—are in fact *identitarian and deontological at heart*. They are objections to the elites’ privileged ability to persevere in their hero-systems while they impose various disabilities on others’ capacity to do the same. This is the meta-equal protection problem, which conservatives experience as *intrinsically* oppressive. Rebuking the *Romer* Court for concluding that Amendment 2 was surely motivated by animus, Justice Scalia argued:

The Court has mistaken a Kulturkampf for a fit of spite. The constitutional amendment before us here is not the manifestation of a "bare . . . desire to harm" homosexuals, ...but is rather a modest attempt by seemingly tolerant Coloradans to preserve traditional sexual mores against the efforts of a politically powerful minority to revise those mores through use of the laws.¹⁸⁰

Amendment 2 could qualify as a "modest" act of cultural self-defense enacted by the "seemingly tolerant" because the liberal elites routinely engage in their own analogous forms of cultural self-defense, when they unostentatiously but pervasively discriminate against what threatens *their* traditional mores, *their* identities. The villeins may harbor some transparently prejudiced attitudes, but the Templars' prejudices are not transformed into anything else than that merely by virtue of being less transparent. Indeed, the level of social surveillance through which academic elites safeguard their cultural capital may be far more extensive than that with which old-fashioned moralists attempt to safeguard traditional morality. This is why conservative claimants of cultural oppression are unmoved by charges of bigotry and parochialism—of a "'bare...desire to harm a politically unpopular group"¹⁸¹ as the *Romer* Court put it. For they understand in their gut, even if not always on the level of ideas, that their ideological opponents are engaged in an enterprise that is fundamentally akin to their own, at least once conceptualized on the most basic, human level. This is the origins of the culture wars. And if the Court mistook a Kulturkampf for a fit of spite, because the dominance of the liberal dispensation compelled it see it this way.

The irrationality that conservatives identify in liberals is significant to them, not for its actual scope and repercussions, but as *evidence for the operation of a hero-system*, for a system of meaning-preservation the exposure of which would undermine what Codevilla calls as the "Ruling Class's fundamental claims to its superior intellect and morality." Conservative claims of cultural oppression are a civilizational rebellion against the culture of careful and critical discourse *qua embodiment of the meta-equal protection problem*. As such, they address themselves, not to deleterious consequences, but to *differential dignity*. Gouldner observes,

...CCD treats the relationship between those who speak it, and others *about whom* they speak, as a relationship between judges and judged. It implies that the established social hierarchy is only a semblance and the deeper, more important distinction is between those who speak and understand truly and those who do not. To participate in the culture of critical discourse, then, is to be emancipated *at once* from lowness in the conventional social hierarchy, and is thus a subversion of that hierarchy. To participate in the culture of critical discourse, then, is a political act.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ *Romer v. Evans*, 517 U.S. 620, 636 (1996) (Scalia, J., dissenting).

¹⁸¹ *Romer v. Evans*, 517 U.S. 620, 634 (1996) (Scalia, J., dissenting).

¹⁸² Gouldner, *Rise of the Intellectuals*, pg. 59.

Translated into our framework, this is a hierarchy between those who stand above the “peculiarly human emotions” and those who do not, between those capable of naturalistic disengagement and those whose sensibilities remain irredeemably anthropocentric, or “pre-modern.” This is the distinctively liberal “bigoted clause,” the distinctively liberal “Moral Order” in relation to which conservatism represents a form of contagion. The New Class may not feel primitive revulsion toward homosexual activity or occupy itself with shaming unwed mothers or the poor. But they nevertheless feel themselves emancipated from a certain kind of lowness, as Gouldner puts it, which they simply identify with conservatism. Hence their conservaphobia, which is the perennial subtext of the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. Conservaphobia is always ensconced in a utilitarian façade, as liberals concern with the pernicious effects of conservative ideas. But conservatives correctly sense that it is a source of *intrinsic* satisfactions, and this is why they claim cultural oppression.

The elitism of the liberal elite is an elitism, not of wealth, status, or even education, but of moral luck, the fact that they have been undeservedly blessed with the capacity to sublimate, intellectualize, and etherealize their illiberalism, and therefore to be illiberal with comparative impunity. Their illiberalism may be less pernicious by some measures. But this is nothing for which they deserve any credit, because this is a difference of social background and personal constitution, not individual courage or intrinsic virtue. Just like everyone else, they have been as Heidegger says *thrown* into a particular field of social meanings. And their good luck on this front is, from the cosmic viewpoint to which they themselves aspire, just as arbitrary as the inherited fortunes of third-generation plutocrats. Hence conservatives’ perverse sense that liberal equality taken to its logical conclusion would somehow redound to their cause. Their claims of cultural oppression endeavor to transpose the categories which liberal discourse applies to *the world* onto that discourse itself, because it is there that the sublimated conservatism of liberals is to be discovered. The profound, ceaselessly innovative perversity of conservative claims of cultural oppression, their ineluctably convoluted character, is the direct outcome of their efforts to transpose the ideals of liberalism onto this meta-level, which is always the inner meaning of what may seem like merely visceral resentment.

The difference between the leftism of the Left and the leftism of the Right is that the latter presupposes a far *higher* level of philosophical abstraction and reflexivity. Hence the rhetorical disadvantage to which conservatives perennially feel themselves subject. This inequality is what allows liberals to seize upon the irrationality of conservatives as structural features of the conservative mindset while chalking up their own irrationality to generic human imperfection—individual idiosyncrasy, practical exigency, rhetorical license, and so on—so that all “insignificant incidents” are forgotten as soon as they

are noticed, and never assembled together as a totality and revealed in their full implications. Doing so is the still unconscious project of conservative claims of cultural oppression—to systematize the irrationalities and inconsistencies of liberals in a way that would reveal the hero-system of which they are the symptom, and thereby disclose the hidden meaning of what might seem like nothing more than a “curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs about the world.” This is the task that now awaits us. The origin and meaning of these beefs is to be found, not in individual or collective contrivance, but in the mutation counter-narrative, the suppressed history of the genesis of the modern liberal identity. And it is to this forgotten history to which our attention now turns.

Chapter Five

The Mutation Counter-Narrative

Drawing primarily on Taylor's *A Secular Age* and Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process*, I will now provide a more detailed account of what I have dubbed the "mutation counter-narrative," the alternative theory of modernity through which conservative claims of cultural oppression become intelligible—as they are not within the subtraction account. In exalting the role of scientific enlightenment in debunking various religious myths, the subtraction account seeks to explain how one *theory* of things replaced another. But it fails to address modernity in terms of the *non-theoretical* changes in our sense of ourselves as agents in the world, to address how, as Taylor says, "our sense of things, our cosmic imaginary, in other words, our whole background understanding and feel of the world has been transformed."¹ Elias puts the point this way:

Civilization, and therefore rationalization, for example, is not a process within a separate sphere of "ideas" or "thought." It does not involve solely changes of "knowledge," transformations of "ideologies," in short alterations of the *content* of consciousness, but changes in the whole human make-up, within which ideas and habits of thought are only a single sector.²

It is precisely these "changes in the whole human make-up" that the subtraction account with its emphasis on the sloughing off of religious and metaphysical illusion must ignore, but which become central within the mutation counter-narrative. The latter does not deny that we have indeed shed many earlier illusions and limitations of knowledge. But it seeks to contextualize those developments—e.g., the decline of superstition and hierarchy, the rise of science and individualism—within other developments pertaining, not to knowledge, but to our pre-theorized experience of self, time, and the social world. It is these developments that made the falling away of superstition possible, and it is against their backdrop that the meaning of our contemporary "enlightenment" has to be understood. Enlightenment connotes the illumination of something that was there all along. But the mutation counter-narrative reveals this to be a kind of social illusion. For we have arrived to where we are, not through any categorical casting off of unthinking traditions in favor of some unvarnished lucidity, but because tensions and contradictions within those traditions unfolded and resolved themselves in particular ways, culminating, not merely in the falling away of certain beliefs, but in the production of a particular kind of identity, a new configuration of consciousness, for which this falling away was natural and perhaps inevitable.

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), pg. 325.

² Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), pg. 485.

Being insensible to these transformations and mistaking the derivative for the essential, the subtraction account must misrepresent as “underlying features of human nature which were there all along” what are in fact the products of certain historically contingent and culturally specific developments, the products of the secularized asceticism that is the taken-for-granted backdrop of modern life. This history is politically consequential because the subtraction account obscures, not only the origins of the modern liberal identity, but also crucial features of its contemporary *structure*. And it is this, as I argued in the last chapter, that conservative claims of cultural oppression are implicitly tracking. What these claims decry as liberalism’s sundry hypocrisies, double-standards, and subterfuges are *distorted interpretations of something that follows logically from the mutation counter-narrative*. For it is this narrative that endows the modern liberal identity with a kind of “thickness” that conservatives sense viscerally but that liberals overlook or deny. In doing so, the mutation counter-narrative also endows conservative claims of cultural oppression with a cogency they would otherwise lack, because these claims are ultimately reactions to precisely this thickness.

Though I will paint the mutation counter-narrative in broad brushstrokes, this should be adequate to our purposes. These purposes being ultimately psychological, sociological, philosophical, and political rather than historical, they would not be served by the kind of fine parsing that might be appropriate elsewhere. Our objective is not to produce a maximally precise rendition of the past, but to use that past to illuminate the present. Having outlined the mutation counter-narrative’s basic parameters in this chapter, I will, in the next, proceed to examine how it imbues conservative claims of cultural oppression with an underlying coherence that is lost on the subtraction account, how it permits us to move beyond any “fundamentalist” interpretation of these claims and access their philosophical substance.

1. Squalor and Coarseness

Whereas the subtraction account begins with a past mired in widespread ignorance and superstition, the starting-point of the mutation counter-narrative is a past beset by rampant personal and social *disorder*. Elias writes that a contemporary westerner who found himself transported back in time to the medieval-feudal period would “depending on his inclinations, be either attracted by the wilder, more unrestrained and adventurous life of the upper classes in this society, or repulsed by the ‘barbaric’ customs, the squalor and coarseness that he encountered there.”³ Whereas the subtraction account calls upon us to conceptualize our relationship to our historical past in epistemological terms, as a contrast

³ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, pg. xi.

between ignorance and enlightenment, the contrast is, for Elias, between the civilized and the uncivilized, with the latter being defined, not by deficits of knowledge, but by its higher threshold of repugnance, by its greater tolerance for squalor and coarseness, its greater acceptance of the *merely animal* in human beings.⁴

This acceptance meant that conduct that would now be deemed “uncivilized” in the extreme was simply taken for granted in medieval Europe.⁵ In eating, for example, “everything is simpler, impulses and inclinations are less restrained.”⁶ Eating together could mean, not just sitting at the same table, but diners “taking meat with their fingers from the same dish, wine from the same goblet, soup from the same pot or the same plate...”⁷ The early modern period saw the beginnings of an effort to raise the shame frontier, but it is telling that admonitions that would today be appropriately directed toward *children*—injunctions “not to snatch whatever they want from the table, and not to scratch themselves or touch their noses, ears, eyes, or other parts of their bodies at table” or “not to speak or drink with a full mouth, or to sprawl on the table, and so on”—were in fact addressed unequivocally to *adults*.⁸ The average adult of the medieval period was in important respects what we would now have to call an overgrown child, simply bereft of the panoply of automatic inhibitions that we associate with adulthood, someone defined as much by his innocence as by his ignorance. One etiquette manual, for example, tells its readers that “[i]t is far less proper to hold out the stinking thing for the other to smell, etc.” Much that now goes without saying had to be said, and conduct that we would unreservedly classify as pathological—like the celebratory public display of one’s own feces—was a mere misdemeanor, the equivalent of biting one’s nails in public today.⁹ Absent was what Elias calls “the invisible wall of affects which seems now to rise between one human body and another, repelling and separating...”¹⁰ Absent was a strong sense that an individual’s dignity was somehow compromised through the exposure of his “animal side.”

Privacy and the felt need for it were therefore minimal in medieval times. It was unremarkable for men and women, masters and servants, hosts and guests, or adults and children to all sleep in the same room,¹¹ as well as for strangers, or children and adults, to share a bed.¹² The naked body was much less problematic. Knights could be waited on by women when bathing, and it was common practice, at

⁴ Ibid., pg. 47.

⁵ Ibid., pgs. 47, 66.

⁶ Ibid., pg. 50.

⁷ Ibid., pg. 55.

⁸ Ibid., pg. 115.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 116.

¹⁰ Ibid., pg. 1d.

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 134.

¹² Ibid., pg. 138.

least in the towns, for entire families to undress at home before heading off, naked or near-naked, to the public bathhouse.¹³ Such were their “traditional family values.” Nor was sex a problematic topic. It was taken for granted that children knew all there was to know about sex, and no effort was made to veil the subject in a shroud of secrecy, or even approach it with any special delicacy.¹⁴ It was the norm at weddings for “bride and bridegroom...[to be] taken to bed by the guests, undressed, and given their nightdress.”¹⁵ Obviously, the ideal of marital intimacy was not what it would later become, both in our culture generally and in Supreme Court decisions, because that “intimacy” was a source of *public* meaning.

This intimacy did not have an absolute value, however. While the Church defended and fought for monogamous marriage, it also accepted that its admonitions would be of limited effect. Monogamy was praised, but adultery did not elicit the kind of social opprobrium that it would draw in later centuries. Extramarital relationships for men, and sometimes also for women, were more or less par for the course in secular circles.¹⁶ Prostitution was also taken for granted. Elias recounts how “[i]n 1434, the Emperor Sigismund publicly thanks the city magistrate of Bern for putting the brothel feely at the disposal of himself and his attendants for three days,” as “[t]his, like a banquet, formed part of the hospitality offered to highranking guests.”¹⁷ Today’s politicians must apologize for their extra-marital dalliances, but Sigismund sexual escapades appeared to be very nearly an official duty. Though it is now said that we have lost our “traditional values,” these medieval practices suggest that those values are not as traditional as many now believe.

The medieval period was just as tolerant of violence as of sex. “Leaving aside a small elite, rapine, pillage, and murder were standard practice in the warrior society of this time,” explains Elias.¹⁸ And these practices were not confined to the knightly nobility, for whom violence was a profession, as “[r]obbery, fighting, pillage, family feuds—all this played a hardly less important role in the life of the town population than in that of the warrior class itself.”¹⁹ Family vengeance, private feuds, and vendettas being par for the course among townsfolk no less than among the nobility, “[t]he little people, too—the hatters, the tailors, the shepherds, were all quick to draw their knives.”²⁰

¹³ Ibid., pg. 134.

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 144.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 146.

¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 150.

¹⁷ Ibid., pg. 145.

¹⁸ Ibid., pg. 159.

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 162.

²⁰ Ibid., pg. 164.

Some degree of vigilante justice was inevitable given that the medieval period lacked anything like the reliable law enforcement we now take for granted. But violence was scarcely regretted as just a necessary evil. On the contrary, “cruelty and joy in the destruction and torment of others, like the proof of physical superiority,” were viewed as normal human passions,²¹ and not as unfortunate malformations. The “pleasure in killing and torturing others was great, and it was a socially permitted pleasure.”²² Especially appealing was the mutilation of prisoners, who were often fodder for eye gouging and amputation.²³ We have prohibited “cruel and unusual punishment,” but cruel *was* usual for medievals. Indeed, gratuitous violence could be publicly celebrated. Elias relates that:

In Paris during the sixteenth century it was one of the festive pleasures of Midsummer Day to burn alive one or two dozen cats. The ceremony was very famous. The populace assembled. Solemn music was played. Under a kind of scaffold an enormous pyre was erected. Then a sack or basket containing the cats was hung from the scaffold. The sack or basket began to smolder. The cats fell into the fire and were burned to death, while the crowd reveled in their caterwauling. Usually the king and queen were present. Sometimes the king or the dauphin was given the honor of lighting the pyre.²⁴

The sadism was undisguised and unabashed. Just as with the care and presentation of the body and its products, conduct that would now constitute evidence of deep mental disturbance, and perhaps a reason for confinement, was commonplace and normal. Indeed, the sadism of the Midsummer Day was deemed appropriate for kings, princes, and queens, God’s representatives on earth, who in this regard at least affirmed a common humanity with their subjects.

This is not to suggest medievals knew only unrelenting violence or were incapable of experiencing what we know to be the full range of human emotions. On the contrary, the difference is that our pre-modern, medieval ancestors experienced that full range of human emotions much more frequently and violently than is now considered psychologically normal:

Not that people were always going around with fierce looks, drawn brows, and martial countenances as the clearly visible symbols of their warlike prowess. On the contrary, a moment ago they were joking, now they mock each other, one word leads to another, and suddenly from the midst of laughter they find themselves in the fiercest feud. Much that appears contradictory to us—the intensity of their piety, the violence of their fear of hell, their guilt feelings, their penitence, the immense outbursts of joy and gaiety, the sudden flaring and the uncontrollable force of their hatred and belligerence—all these, like the rapid changes of mood, are in reality symptoms of the same social and personality structure. The instincts, the emotions were vented more freely, more directly, more openly than later. It is only to us, in whom everything is more subdued, moderate, and calculated, and in whom social taboos are built much more deeply into

²¹ Ibid., pg. 158.

²² Ibid., pg. 159.

²³ Ibid., pg. 158.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 167.

the fabric of instinctual life as self-restraints, that this unveiled intensity of piety, belligerence, or cruelty appears as contradictory.²⁵

Medievals were distinguished from us not by any generalized amorality or egoism, but by a fundamentally different ordering of their affects. They lived in a society in which individuals gave way to their drives with an ease, spontaneity, and openness that would be utterly foreign to us today, and so had emotional lives that were comparatively unregulated and liable to oscillate violently and unpredictably between extremes.²⁶ Many of these impulses were formally condemned by prevailing social codes. But those codes remained just that, codes, precepts which were known but not at all internalized to the degree to which they have since become. For no one imagined that they realistically could be.²⁷ By contrast with the automatic self-control that we now take for granted,

[T]he incurable unrest, the perpetual proximity of danger, the whole atmosphere of this unpredictable and insecure life, in which there are at most small and transient islands of more protected existence, often engenders even without external cause, sudden switches from the most exuberant pleasure to the deepest despondency and remorse. The personality, if we may put it thus, is incomparably more ready and accustomed to leap with undiminishing intensity from one extreme to the other, and slight impressions, uncontrollable associations are often enough to induce these immense fluctuations."²⁸

Human beings were more animal-like, not only in the externals of habit and self-presentation, but also at the deeper levels of their underlying affective-instinctual make-ups, continuously beholden to whatever random stimuli were at hand in their immediate environments, and comparatively incapable of stepping back from them. This was a consequence, not of ignorance, but of their basic human constitutions and the social conditions which made these adaptive. Self-discipline is now the *sine qua non* of social success and respectability. But things were otherwise within an insecure existence that permitted only minimal thought for the future and where an excess of such thought was maladaptive. One or another form of emotional intensity was always the order of the day, and so "[w]hoever did not love or hate to the utmost in this society, whoever could not stand his ground in the play of passions, could go into a monastery."²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 164.

²⁶ Ibid., pg. 175.

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 66 ("Over and again, down the centuries, the same good and bad manners are mentioned. The social code hardened into lasting habits only to a limited extent in people themselves")

²⁸ Ibid., pg. 449; The medieval period is characterized by a certain "naivete": There are, as in all societies where the emotions are expressed more violently and directly, fewer psychological nuances and complexities in the general stock of ideas." TCP 50

²⁹ Ibid., pg. 164.

2. Pre-Modern Relativism

In this connection, it might be asked just why religion proved incapable of more thoroughly reigning in the wantonness described by Elias. After all, we look upon the Middle Ages as a pervasively religious era whose strictures and doctrines brooked little dissent, and this seems incompatible with the kind of license that medievals routinely permitted themselves and tolerated in others. But as Elias explains, “[r]eligion, the belief in the punishing or rewarding omnipotence of God, never has itself a ‘civilizing’ or affect-subduing effect. On the contrary, religion is always exactly as ‘civilized’ as the society or class which upholds it.”³⁰ Pre-modern Christianity was not what it would later become. And as we will see, the broader religious cosmology of the period, already broached in the last chapter, served to encourage rather than to counteract the general affect-structure responsible for the personal and social disorder we have examined, a disorder to which religious doctrine may have been formally opposed but to which it was also largely resigned.

* * *

The secular is now understood to be a sphere distinct from the religious that operates according to its own self-contained logic. This is why we believe that church and state can be “separated.” But this is possible only because, as Nomi Stolzenberg puts it, “the concept of the secular has itself, ironically, been secularized and modernized.”³¹ Pre-moderns had not yet secularized the concept of the secular and so understood the relationship between the secular and the religious altogether very. Stolzenberg explains:

The “secular” was, in fact, originally a *religious* concept, a product of traditional religious epistemological frameworks. The concept of the secular always served the function of distinguishing religious from nonreligious domains. But nonreligious domains did not, in the premodern view, exist outside the religious epistemological framework. On the contrary, that framework of meaning was all-encompassing, overarching, comprehending within *every* domain of human (and nonhuman) action and cognition, both the spiritual and the temporal, the holy and the unholy, the ecclesiastical and the secular, the sacred and the profane. In their original usage, oppositions such as the spiritual and the secular, the sacred and the profane, did not denote two different mindsets or conceptual systems or frameworks of meaning (as they do today). Rather, they referred to different institutions, different jurisdictions, different functions, and different domains, all of which were located within a single conceptual universe.³²

The secular’s original home within a religious conceptual universe was the reason why medievals could speak of the “secular clergy” without contradiction. The secular clergy, like the parish priests, were here

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 164.

³¹ Stolzenberg, *Profanity of Law*, pg. 31

³² Nomi Stolzenberg, *The Profanity of Law*, in *LAW AND THE SACRED*, eds. Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, and Martha Merrill Umphrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) pgs. 30-31.

being contrasted with the monastic orders, which were non-secular because they lived closer to the eternal, away from the ordinary time of day-to-day village life.³³ Their secular counterparts were secular, not because they were non-religious in our contemporary sense of the term, but because they occupied a lower rung within a religiously defined hierarchy. Church and state were separated in that the secular and religious spheres were governed by distinctive authorities and norms. But this was a functional separation, not a separation of ultimate purposes or values. Thus, a religious tribunal could be required to hand over a religious heretic to the secular authorities for a secular punishment, not because these authorities were “non-religious” in the sense of being indifferent to religion, but because their lower station in a religiously defined hierarchy suited them for the shedding of blood—which did not similarly befit those stationed higher up the hierarchy.³⁴

We might say that the religious and the secular existed along a continuum, with the significance of secular phenomena being a function of their proximity to or distance from the religious, or the eternal. The secular was defined, not by the simple *absence* of religion, but by its *remove* from the higher rungs of religious devotion, and so *presupposed* religion as its broader cosmological framework. Indeed, the “secular” originally referred to “ordinary as against higher time,”³⁵ to the stretch of time in between the Resurrection and the Second Coming during which Christians would have to patiently endure their fallen condition in anticipation of the world’s final redemption. The secular was in a sense just the logical byproduct of our spiritual imperfections, which was what made it an essentially religious concept. The religious and secular realms could enter into conflict. But they did so, not, as they now do, as, as *two incompatible worldviews*, but rather as *two sets of priorities within one worldview* which had for some reason been brought into disequilibrium. The demands of secular time and eternal time could, as Taylor says, “flare into opposition when humans cling to their ‘secular’ condition as ultimate,”³⁶ at which point the otherwise “less religious” could become anti-religious by overstepping its place and crowding out our connection to the higher. The secular was dangerous, not as the theorized denial of God’s existence or relevance, but as a realm of experience that threatened to engross us out of proportion to its true importance, and so to blind us to the wider order of which it is only a subordinate part.

So intertwined were the secular and the religious that it is not strictly accurate to say that the Catholic Church itself was a purely religious as opposed to secular institution. For it was the institution charged with *mediating* between the religious and the secular, with harmonizing the City of God and the

³³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 265.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 265.

³⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 55.

³⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 265.

City of Man to the extent this was possible in a fallen world. As José Casanova observes, the Church was at once *ecclesia invisibilis* and the *ecclesia visibilis*, partaking at once of both spiritual and temporal reality.³⁷ Stolzenberg observes that the medieval Church endorsed secular authority, not only out of realpolitik, but as a matter of religious principle. Whereas today's fundamentalists view secular law as a potential threat to religious law, the medieval Church counted upon secular law to achieve what religious law could not. Given that human beings lacked the perfect omniscience and understanding of God, they could not be relied upon to properly administer religious law without satisfying an unrealistically heavy burden of proof—in whose absence they would falter and condemn the innocent. But since criminals had to be punished and deterred and God could not have willed otherwise, it was necessary to cordon off a sphere of secular law where criminals could be dealt with without the impractically stringent evidentiary requirements that governed religious law. The secular was at once non-religious and an emanation of the religious, embodying what was a religiously sanctioned compromise with a fallen world, and so as much a part of God's domain as anything else.

The concept of the religious has also been secularized and modernized, as a distinct sphere concerning the ultimate truth or meaning of things that can be disintricated from purely worldly concern. And this too is something new. As Brent Nongbri argues in his *Before Religion*, the concept of "religion" is in important respects distinctively modern, and not as is commonly believed a perennial feature of all human cultures. For what we now translate as the "religion" of pre-modern societies never referred to any personal beliefs about how to obtain salvation or lead a good life. These connotations are modern projections, because their "religion" denoted activities more than it did beliefs, and was bound up with civic norms and notions of political order and ethnic community. These things greatly overshadowed what we now identify as the essentially cognitive and private nature of religion as a kind of mental assent to a set of ideas.³⁸ "Religion" as understood by pre-moderns could not refer to any such ideas standing at a categorical remove from worldly affairs because "religion" constituted the total background against which individuals made sense of all their affairs. This intertwining of the religious and the secular was just a facet of what we already observed to be pre-moderns' total teleological immersion, their inability to disengage from the total background order in relation to which they strove to position themselves "well, fully, with éclat."

³⁷ José Casanova, "A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), pg. 275.

³⁸ Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 20013), pgs. 1-6, 27-45, 63, 85-101, 151-52.

It bears emphasis, however, that while the religious and the secular seem highly “fused” in the medieval world by comparison with modern times, they were in fact quite *differentiated* by comparison with earlier forms of social life. Robert Bellah notes that it was through the successful execution of priestly functions—building temples, making lavish sacrificial offerings, and so forth—that the king in archaic society maintained his regal credibility.³⁹ While medieval monarchs also believed they had duties toward God, these no longer assumed a priestly form, as was normal in archaic societies. The line between the “religious” and the “secular” becomes even more greatly blurred in tribal societies, which appeared to lack any clear and distinct notions of divinity. The ancestors were indeed powerful beings, but there was no absolute ontological separation between divinity and “mere mortals.”⁴⁰ Both existed along a continuum of power and prestige. It would therefore be an anachronism to see tribal societies as engaged in anything like “worship” in the contemporary sense of the term.⁴¹ The ancestors demanded homage and deference, the *sine qua non* of drawing on their powers, but not necessarily prostration or supplication, as might be owed to a “god.” Surprisingly, we can discern a remnant of this earlier dispensation as late as the Hebrew Scriptures, when Jacob wrestled all night with God, who is represented, Bellah says, as “a powerful being only marginally stronger than a very strong man.”⁴² The concept of the secular is, on one level, indigenous to medieval Christianity, just as the concept of the religious is on one level indigenous to the modern world. Nevertheless, it is useful to think of the differentiation of the religious and the secular as existing historically along a continuum, with the medieval dispensation being considerably more differentiated than earlier “religion” but considerably less differentiated than it has become in our own times.

* * *

The “natural” and the “supernatural” were just as intertwined for pre-moderns as were the secular and the religious. Our pre-modern ancestors are now looked upon as “superstitious” because they believed that evil spirits could impinge on their fortunes in ways incompatible with what we know to be the laws of natural causality. Yet this label understates the magnitude of the chasm separating their sensibilities from our own. We conceive of superstitions as discrete beliefs to the effect that supernatural forces intermittently interfere with the workings of natural causality—for example, opening an umbrella

³⁹ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), pg. 218.

⁴⁰ Ibid. pg. 202.

⁴¹ Ibid. pg. 94

⁴² Ibid. pg. 95-96

indoors, the black cat that crosses our path, or a ghostly apparition that returns to cause mischief in a former dwelling. But as with the secular and the religious, our pre-modern ancestors had not yet marked off the natural and the supernatural as two distinct spheres that might come into contact with one another on specific occasions in defiance of the laws of physics. What we now conceptualize as natural regularity temporarily superseded by supernatural irregularity was for our pre-modern forbearers irreducible to either of these, and rather consisted in a single overarching order that was neither strictly natural nor strictly supernatural in our contemporary sense of the terms. While nature was understood as pervaded by certain forms of regularity, this was not the strictly causal regularity that is the object of natural science, and consisted rather in a set of patterns that embodied God's order. The natural world, and indeed the social world, was understood as *embodying*, and not just as having been *caused or affected* by, that order. The essence of things lied, not in their particularity, but, as Gillespie puts it, in their "instantiation of the categories of divine reason."⁴³ Nature was that through which God revealed his order to us.

This meant that natural causality could not be disentangled from the moral or spiritual significance of things and that natural events were portents of our moral/spiritual condition. If an individual or collective sin resulted in some misfortune, like a poor harvest or disease, the reason was not simply that God had elected to "veto" natural causality in order to punish moral dereliction, but that this dereliction had in and of itself upset the order of things. Sin could precipitate a poor harvest in the same way that a rock tossed into a pond can stimulate a ripple, as part and parcel of a general disequilibrium with implications far and wide. The misfortune was indeed a form of divine retribution, but this was a divinity that was in various ways *embedded* in the natural world, and not merely a distant supervisor intervening selectively like the police. Any "irregularity" was the product, not of bare fiat, but of some disruption within the forces that would ordinarily produce regularity. The difference between modern and pre-modern, then, is not simply that we have become less disposed to believe in the empirical reality of supernatural events, but that modernity has altered our understanding of what the supernatural properly consists in, creating distinctions that were generally *blurred* for pre-moderns.

This blurring was why pre-moderns could believe in the *sacred*, why they believed, as Taylor says, that "God's power is somehow concentrated in certain people, times, places or actions."⁴⁴ God being understood as embedded in the world, it wasn't too big a stretch to imagine that he is more greatly embedded in some places and at some times than others. Medieval Christians experienced the sacred

⁴³ Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (The University of Chicago Press 2008), pg. 14.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 76.

through what Taylor calls *charged objects*—like sacred relics, charmed amulets, etc.—that could be manipulated to one’s material and spiritual advantage, with the recitation of the appropriate chants, perhaps. There could also be charged places, to which one made pilgrimage. And there were charged times, as during a religious festival celebrating the Resurrection, which affirmed the dependence of secular time on eternal time in an attempt to infuse the former with the power of the latter. The sacred was not an alternative realm removed from everyday life, but those points in everyday life where the eternal “broke through” into secular space and time.

This blurring of the natural and the supernatural through openness to the sacred meant that the distinction between the mind and the world was also blurred—which is why the disengaged strategic agent beholding the world non-anthropocentrically would have been incomprehensible to pre-moderns. Taylor explains:

In the enchanted world of 500 years ago, a clear line between the physical and the moral wasn’t drawn. But this is just another facet of the basic fact that the boundary around the mind was constitutionally porous. Things and agencies which are clearly extra-human could alter or shape our spiritual and emotional condition, and not just our physical state (and hence mediate our spiritual and emotional condition), but together in one act. These agencies didn’t simply operate from outside the “mind,” they helped to constitute us emotionally and spiritually.⁴⁵

We can easily recognize how the emotional malevolence of *another human being* might under some conditions be invasive in this sense, as when we cannot firmly disentangle his attitudes toward us from our own self-image. This is because our basic human nature as social beings prevents us from viewing his opinion non-anthropocentrically, as the product of causal forces rather than as a source of human meanings. But being anthropocentric through and through, the enchanted world of pre-modernity did not admit of any clearly drawn line between personal agency and impersonal force. And so mere things could induce certain meanings in humans the way other humans now do. Some things were agencies, supernatural in the way other humans seem supernatural, just not subject to naturalistic objectification. This is why an “object/agent” in the enchanted world, like a sacred relic or holy site, could influence us, not merely by awakening certain judgments in us, but by “bringing us as it were into its field of force,”⁴⁶ just like other people can now bring us within their field of force. They *imposed* meanings that operated independently of us, which was precisely what made objects “charged.”

The order of things in relation to which pre-moderns sought to position themselves “well, fully, with éclat” was not some distant, ethereal realm which might come into contact with our own under

⁴⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pgs. 33.

exceptional circumstances, but something that permeated people's basic sense of agency on a visceral, physical level. Taylor again explains:

A modern is feeling depressed, melancholy. He is told: it's just your body chemistry, you're hungry, or there is a hormone malfunctioning, or whatever. Straightaway, he feels relieved. He can take a distance from this feeling, which is ipso facto declared not justified. Things don't really have this meaning; it just feels this way, which is the result of a causal action utterly unrelated to the meanings of things. This step of disengagement depends on our modern mind/body distinction, and the relegation of the physical to being "just" a contingent cause of the psychic.

But a pre-modern may not be helped by learning that his mood comes from black bile. Because this doesn't permit a distancing. Black bile is melancholy. Now he just knows that he's in the grips of the real thing.

Here is the contrast between the modern, bounded self—I want to say "buffered" self—and the "porous" self of the earlier enchanted world...

...for the modern, buffered self, the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind. My ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meanings of things are those defined in my responses to them.

---by definition for the porous self, the source of its most powerful and important emotions are outside the "mind"; or better put, the very notion that there is a clear boundary, allowing us to define an inner base area, grounded in which we can disengage from the rest, has no sense.

As a bounded self I can see the boundary as a buffer, such that the things beyond don't need to "get to me", to use the contemporary expression. That's the sense to my use of the term "buffered" here. This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it.⁴⁷

This is why the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity would have been inconceivable for pre-moderns. The latter were not "buffered," and this is why they could not have "stepped back" from their total teleological immersion into naturalistic lucidity. The anthropocentricity of pre-moderns was in the first instance a function, not of limited knowledge, but of their particular form of agency—the nature of the *boundary*, or lack thereof, between self and world. The crucial difference between moderns and pre-moderns is not that the former, unlike the latter, *believe* that their mental states originate in a physiological substratum interacting with the rest of the physical world (producing either "delight" or "annoyance" as Hobbes says), but that the former, unlike the latter, have a form of consciousness and identity within which this proposition is intelligible in the first place. A pre-modern couldn't seriously contemplate the thought that "it just feels this way," not because he was ignorant of his feelings' causal springs, but because he was *porous rather than buffered*, because his basic, pre-theoretical experience of the world did not permit any clear-cut distinctions between the inner and the outer, between how things feel and how they are. This is a difference, not of beliefs, but of the pre-deliberative disposition to "distance" from one's pre-reflective, pre-theorized layer of experience. Pre-moderns lacked this disposition, and the result was that spirits forces were, as Taylor puts it, "just unproblematically there,

⁴⁷ Ibid., pgs. 37-38.

impinging on us.”⁴⁸ This was in just the same way that the physical environment is something that is “just unproblematically there” for us moderns—something which it is simply impossible to doubt in the course of one’s day-to-day engagement with the world.

The individual who “believed” himself possessed by a spirit did not maintain this belief as a theoretical proposition, but rather experienced it with the same visceral certainty with which he experienced the physical body in which it had become lodged. For he simply lacked the “inner base area” form whose vantage point that experience could be conceptualized as the contents of a “mind” that may or may not correspond to the contents of an “external” world. This absence permitted experiences of which most of us are no longer capable. Becker writes:

And so we find that auditory hallucinations can be normal in a culture where one is expected to hear periodically the voice of God; visual hallucinations can be normal where, as among the Plains Indians, one’s Guardian Spirit manifested itself in a vision; or where, as among South Italian Catholics, the appearance of the Virgin Mary is a blessed event. Spirit possession can be a great talent even though we consider it psychiatrically a form of dissociation. What we call “hysterical symptoms” are thought to be signs of special gifts, powers that come to lodge in one’s body and show themselves by speaking strange tongues through the mouth of the one who is possessed, and so on.⁴⁹

The difference between the modern, buffered self and the pre-modern, porous one cannot be reduced to a difference of belief, as per the subtraction account, because it also involves a difference in *what it means to believe*. Pre-moderns did not merely possess different religious beliefs than do we, but were moreover differently *possessed by* those beliefs. These informed, not merely their decisions and deliberations, but, more profoundly, their very sense of themselves as agents. Pre-moderns were “opened up” to forces that could, for good or ill, penetrate and mold their own affect-structure from the outside-in. Their teleology was no mere conviction, but the very substrate of their agency. The order of things, and so the significance of particular things, was not merely believed in, but *inhabited*, impinging on individuals more like the temperature or humidity than as an object of visual perception—to employ an imperfect but hopefully useful analogy.

* * *

As we will now see, this cosmology was the reason why pre-modern religion could not have been expected to reign in the license and disorder of the medieval world. Medieval societies may have held certain unscrutinized “dogmas” about what *constitutes* sin. But they were also profoundly modest about

⁴⁸ Ibid., pg. 30.

⁴⁹ Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), pg. 131.

the possibility of actually implementing these dogmas. Given our sinful state, “porous” selves simply could not be counted on to exercise the kind of self-control that reigning in disorder would require. And so the Middle Ages were, Taylor writes, “steeped in the view, which has probably been the way most people in most ages have seen this question, that there are severe limits to the degree in which sin and disorder can be done away with in this world.”⁵⁰ Yet this sense of limitation and its implications must be overlooked if we look upon the medieval world through the lens of the subtraction account. This is illustrated in Berger’s analyses when he argues:

The individual in most pre-modern societies lives in a world that is much more coherent. It therefore appears to him as firm and possibly inevitable. By contrast, the modern individual’s experience of plurality of social worlds relativizes every one of them. Consequently, the institutional order undergoes a certain loss of reality. The ‘accent of reality’ consequently shifts from the objective order of institutions to the realm of subjectivity. Put differently, the individual’s experience of himself becomes more real to him than his experience of the objective social world. Therefore, the individual seeks to find his ‘foothold’ in reality in himself rather than outside himself. One consequence of this is that the individual’s subjective reality (what is commonly regarded as his ‘psychology’) becomes increasingly differentiated, complex—and ‘interesting’ to himself. Subjectivity acquires previously unconceived ‘depths.’⁵¹

This subtraction account-inspired picture of the relationship between the modern and pre-modern suggests that the latter is defined by a religiously-enforced moral and psychological rigidity that was gradually eroded by various secularizing, and therefore liberalizing, influences. But this is a tremendous oversimplification that is just as false in some respects as it is true in others. For it simply overlooks the kind of psychological flux that characterized the pre-modern personality structure and that rendered pre-modern social life much less “firm” than we are wont to imagine.

It is true, of course, that social roles in the pre-modern world were generally “rigid” in that they did not lend themselves to any revolutionary questioning, and it is likewise true that the pre-modern self lacked the “depth” which we associate with the modern one, as this presupposes the kind of disengagement of which porous selves were incapable. This is what Berger succeeds in capturing. But this did not make pre-modern social life “firm” in every way. For the firmness that may have been the ideal was at every turn vitiated by pre-modern porousness, which resigned pre-moderns to disorder as an intrinsic feature of social life. Their morality was therefore informed by a sense of what Taylor calls “complementarity,” a sense of the “mutual necessity of opposites,” the ineluctable co-dependence of both “structure and anti-structure.”⁵² While pre-moderns were hardly moral relativists or subjectivists in

⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 119.

⁵¹ Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pg. 77.

⁵² Ibid., pg. 47.

our sense of the terms, this acceptance of flux and chaos as the basic fabric of life meant that they weren't strict, humorless moralists either. They may have been "dogmatic" in some sense. But with sin and disorder having been accepted as givens, dogma was compatible with the belief that "the human code exists within a larger spiritual cosmos, and its opening to anti-structure is what is required to keep society in tune with the cosmos, or to draw on its forces."⁵³ The social order could not be entirely "firm" because it was understood as but part of the cosmic stage onto which we had been plopped by forces that transcended and relativized it. "Firmness" was possible in the City of God but not in the City of Man, which unlike the former is not immune to the anti-structure that will always obtrude upon all merely human designs.

This sensibility is illustrated in the widespread phenomenon of "carnival" in pre-modern societies. Carnivals are now mere "holidays," respites from the demands of everyday life. But the kind of respite offered by the pre-modern carnival was more profound and thoroughgoing. Much more than a public holiday, carnival represented a "ludic interval, in which people played out a condition of reversal of the usual order." During such periods, "[b]oys wore the mitre, or fools were made kings for a day; what was ordinarily revered was mocked, people permitted themselves various forms of license, not just sexually but also in close-to-violent acts, and the like."⁵⁴ With pre-moderns being constitutionally porous, the suspension of their daily routine went further than it possibly can for us, extending, not only to formal expectations of appropriate behavior, but, as with good and evil spirits, to the depths of one's being.

The social worlds of pre-moderns could be no firmer than the porousness of the selves who made up those worlds. For that porousness necessarily vitiated the stability of social forms, which might therefore have to surrender to the periodic invasions of supra-social forces. How could society demand any more affective-instinctual self-control from its members than the very structure of man's relation to the universe was itself prepared to countenance, or even render intelligible? Being "opened out" to forces that transcended and engulfed him, the individual was scarcely the center of the universe, or even the center of his own universe, and so could scarcely be expected to a level of self-control and self-restraint that presupposes just this. Carnival was a kind of ritual acknowledgment of these limitations—of a world populated by agents so constituted as to be perennially subject to evil spirits capable of colonizing their subjectivities, a world in which an ordered mental life could not be assured by mere will power because that very will power depended on maintaining a proper relationship to a broader cosmic order that was

⁵³ Ibid., pg. 50.

⁵⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 46.

always in flux for temporal beings. Only God himself, the pinnacle of the Great Chain of Being, was absolute and unchanging, and humans could not but fall short of that high standard.

The pre-modern condition was therefore marked by its own kind of relativism and pluralism. For medievals recognized that most people were never going to achieve sainthood and that it was therefore foolish to insist on a single inflexible moral code to govern everyone at all times. While the subtraction account disposes us to view tolerance and skepticism as quintessentially modern virtues, the product of our quintessentially modern reflectiveness, the mutation counter-narrative suggests that there may have been a certain kind of tolerance and skepticism that was simply built into the unreflective impulses of pre-moderns, a tolerance and skepticism sustained, not by critical cosmopolitanism, but by uncritical humility about self and society. Pre-moderns did not understand their inherited norms as “social constructions,” as do the critical theorists of today, but these were constructions nonetheless, cosmic constructions we might say.

3. Building Renunciation into Everyday Life

The question, then, is how societies whose denizens were potentially beholden to the invasive machinations of evil spirits and which were resigned to a ceaseless cycle of order and chaos, of redemption and recurring sin, became transformed into societies whose denizens could see themselves as strategic agents, make ideals of rational self-interest or personal authenticity, and entertain strong notions of moral, social, political, and technological progress. The subtraction account answers that such was achieved through the progressive overthrowing of the psychological, social, and scientific ignorance that previously impeded it. The mutation counter-narrative, on the other hand, posits that this social transformation presupposed a more basic *transformation in human beings' basic sense of agency*. Human beings had to become “buffered” because it was the constitutional porousness of pre-moderns, and not merely their ignorance and dogmatism, which had formerly impeded “progress.” And so what we now call progress can only be understood in the context of this transformation, in the context of our progressive buffering in the direction of the modern liberal identity.

One important source of that transformation, I shall now explain, originated in tensions that had always inhered in Christianity itself, tensions whose unfolding gradually paved the way for our contemporary secular worldview. Those tensions arose, most fundamentally, from the tension between the City of God and the City of Man, between the ideal of other-worldly renunciation and the imperatives of day-to-day existence and worldly desire. This conflict was, during the Middle Ages, managed through a kind of division of labor between religious elites who forswore ordinary life in favor of religious

renunciation and lay persons who forwent the renunciation in order to live amidst the travails and corruptions of secular time. And it was an emerging dissatisfaction with this division and dualism that engendered the social and cultural conditions under which the modern identity could develop, under which heretofore porous selves could become buffered.

This is not to say that the lay populace of medieval Europe was “secular” in the contemporary sense of the term, of course. As we saw, the secular and the religious could not be neatly disentangled in pre-modern societies. Whether lay or devout, their members could not but encounter God everywhere they went.⁵⁵ God was, like spirits, something that existed within their pre-reflective, pre-deliberative layer of experience. Far from being the object of discrete convictions, God was the condition for the intelligibility of the entire world, including ostensibly “secular” spheres, whose meaning was a function of their place in a religiously-defined cosmos.

The difference between elite and lay religiosity was therefore not so much one of degree as of *form*. It was the difference, as Taylor puts it, “between a faith in which the doctrinal element was more developed, and in which devotional life took to some degree the form of inner prayer, and later even meditative practices” and a faith “where the belief content was very rudimentary, and devotional practice was largely a matter of what one did.”⁵⁶ The lay populace did not need to devote itself to doctrine and inner prayer in order to be religious in a meaningful sense because, lacking a rigid distinction between the natural and the supernatural, it possessed a strong notion of the sacred. And so it could engage the divine through ritual and contact with sacred objects, places, and times—the mediums by which God embedded himself in secular time—without concerning itself with soul-searching Augustinian introspection or the fine points of theological doctrine. An illiterate peasant inhabiting the secular day-to-day world might still be intensely religious. But this would be, not by cultivating inner piety or theological understanding, but, to return to Becker’s example, through apparitions of the Virgin Mary—which could bring him within her “field of force” without requiring much in the way of the formal learning or ascetic renunciation that defined the more self-conscious and sophisticated devotion of the monastic orders and other religious elites. We might say that our pre-modern ancestors did not have to go much out of their way to be religious because religion was by way of this embeddedness in the temporal world *already going out of its way for them*.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 25.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 63.

This division of labor was gradually brought to a close through a movement of Religious Reform—which we associate with Protestantism but which also had Catholic variants—that was driven by what Taylor describes as “a profound dissatisfaction with the hierarchical equilibrium between lay life and the renunciative vocations.”⁵⁷ Lay religiosity became questionable because there had developed in the Catholic Church in the Late Middle Ages, and then especially through the Reformation, “a deep theological objection” to the idea that charged objects, times, places, and events were imbued with a spiritual significance that was elsewhere absent and could, if properly approached, be exploited for human ends.⁵⁸ This, many came to believe, was already to presume too much, because “God’s power can’t be contained like this, controlled as it were, through its confinement in things, and thus ‘aimed’ by us in one direction or another.”⁵⁹ To presume that God can be manipulated through the handling of relics, the supplication of saints, the invocation of chants, or the undertaking of pilgrimages and the like, was to impliedly deny the full extent of his sovereignty—to sinfully downgrade God in order to sinfully elevate oneself—and therefore to betray true Christianity, whose original mission was to raise human beings above all such relics of paganism.

Finding lay devotion, with its concentration on sacred sites, objects, and times an insult to what it believed was the unqualified transcendence and dignity of a deity who does not deign to embed his divinity where it can be manipulated by mere humans, the movement of Reform looked for a new way to reconcile an affirmation of ordinary life with the genuine affirmation of God. It ended up doing so, not by turning laymen into part-time monks, but by synthesizing both roles into a new ideal of human flourishing that could imbue lay, secular life, with a new, more dignified kind of religious significance. And this meant *embedding the renunciatory devotion of religious elites in the worldly conduct of laypersons*. Thus, Taylor explains that for the Protestant Reformation,

All valid Christian vocations are those of ordinary life, of production and reproduction in the world. The crucial issue is how you live these vocations. The two spheres are collapsed into each other. Monastic rules disappear, but ordinary lay life is now under more stringent demands. Some of the ascetic norms of monastic life are now transferred to the secular.⁶⁰

The work of religious Reform sought to make over the City of Man in the image of the City of God through the gradual transplantation and transmogrification of various ascetic attitudes and practices from the province of religious elites, where they were confined during the medieval period, to new secular ones.

⁵⁷Ibid., pg. 61.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pg. 72.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pg. 72.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pg. 266.

In rejecting the notion that ordinary life can be renounced in order to give oneself more wholly to God, radical Protestantism “abolishes the supposedly higher, renunciative vocations” while also building “renunciation into ordinary life,”⁶¹ demanding that individuals pursue worldly ends but in a self-disciplined renunciatory spirit, without the intensity and oscillation of personal affect that defined worldly engagement in the earlier medieval period. The affirmation of ordinary life and the affirmation of God could be reconciled by “living in all the practices and institutions of flourishing, but at the same time not [being] fully in them. Being in them but not of them; being in them, but yet at a distance, ready to lose them.”⁶² For this is what God now demands of us. God as progressively reconfigured by Religious Reform became a deity who involves himself in our lives, not directly through particular sacred objects or events, but indirectly through the broader normative order he has created in the world as a whole. His glory was announced, not through his augmented presence at sacred times and places, but by the wisdom and grandeur of his design.⁶³ And it is by conforming to this design that we worship him.

Many today believe that religion and morality are intimately connected. But it was the gradual expulsion of the sacred effected by Religious Reform that first *moralized* religion. For one came to understand God, not by directly experiencing his presence, but by adapting to the moral plan he has put into place for us.⁶⁴ Living a godly life became less and less “a matter of admiring a normative order, in which God has revealed himself through signs and symbols” and more and more a matter of inhabiting this order “as agents of instrumental reason, working the system effectively in order to bring about God’s purposes.”⁶⁵ Rather than indulging in the spiritual infusions provided by rituals and charged objects, Christians would have to discipline any such predilections and commit themselves to leading orderly lives in orderly societies, God’s true purpose for us. And so religion becomes “less and less concerned with sin as a condition we need to be rescued from through some transformation of our being, and more and more with sin as wrong behaviour which we can be persuaded, trained or disciplined to turn our back on.”⁶⁶ To the extent our being was amenable to transformation, this was to be achieved, not through a renunciation of the human will before some ineffable intuition of the higher, but through the cultivation and disciplining of that will, by coming to see *ourselves* rather than sacred relics as the proper bearers of the teleology that God had ordained.

⁶¹ Ibid., pg. 81.

⁶² Ibid., pg. 81.

⁶³ Ibid., pg. 446.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pg. 312.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pg. 98.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pg. 225.

Though some contemporary secularists would dismiss religion as such as pathology and self-delusion, this charge was in the first instance leveled by the Religious Reformers against earlier forms of religiosity. Hence their hostility toward “fanaticism” and “enthusiasm,” which were seen as relics of an earlier age. Taylor explains:

‘Fanaticism’ designated the kind of religious certainty that seemed to the agent concerned to license going well beyond, and even committing gross violations against the order of mutual benefit. While ‘enthusiasm’ meant the certainty that one heard the voice of God, without having to rely on external authorities, ecclesiastical or civil.⁶⁷

Fanaticism and enthusiasm could become anathema to “true religion” because they were reminders of our former porousness, our former openness to forces that penetrated our very being, molding us from without. These proclivities became objectionable because Religious Reform signified a transformation, not merely in the formal content of religious belief, but also in the background form of religious *experience* that structured these beliefs. In precipitating what Taylor calls the “excarnation” of religion, Reform moved us from an era in which religious life was more “embodied” or “enfleshed” into an era where religion became more “in the head.”⁶⁸ As Barrett observes, faith in God was originally experienced as a “concrete mode of being,” as “the opening up of one being toward another” before it later became “propositional,” understood as intellectual assent to a proposition, to statements, creeds, and systems.⁶⁹ Religion came to mean believing the right things and conducting oneself accordingly. And this required extirpating people’s sense that they were opened out to forces that can suffuse their very being, turning them into mere vessels of a higher power.

What was formerly the essence of religion was now condemned as sinful pride. For the true faith was now excarnated, propositional religion. And the embodied feeling through which the sacred was formerly accessed by Christians and pagans alike was now stigmatized as mere sensuality and impulse. Religious Reform sought to, Taylor writes, undercut “the aura of the higher that usually surrounds...[e]mbodied feeling,” endowing the latter with “a purely naturalistic explanation,” so that it could no longer qualify as “a medium in which we relate to what we recognize as rightly bearing an aura of the higher.”⁷⁰ It was only at this point that “religion” in the modern sense—as a set of discrete beliefs about a sphere with which we possessed no immediate physical contact—becomes possible. Reform did not merely supplant certain religious “opinions” centered around the sacred with other religious opinions

⁶⁷Ibid., pg. 239.

⁶⁸Ibid., pg. 554.

⁶⁹ William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1958), pg.74.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 288.

rooted in notions of a providential order, but moreover “buffered” heretofore porous selves so that they might understand their religiosity as *consisting in opinions*, rather than a visceral openness to sacred powers. Taylor calls this the “steady disembodiment of spiritual life,”⁷¹ and it was by way of it that the “inner base area” of the buffered self gradually developed.

* * *

It was on the basis of these transformations that religion first became capable of curbing the wantonness and license that were par for the course in the Middle Ages. It could do so, not only because of the moral precepts it issued, but, more fundamentally, because this new understanding of the self’s relationship to God allowed those precepts to resonate in ways that were previously impossible. Unlike the older, pre-modern religious cosmology of the Middle Ages, this new dispensation *could* function to counteract and constrain wild oscillations of affect of the porous self, because this was precisely what God was demanding—because this was precisely what living in “all the practices and institutions of human flourishing” without being “of them” entailed. Humans were to establish contact with the divine, not through the mediation of the sacred, but through the mediation of their own efforts, by realizing in their daily lives an asceticism that was previously confined to the monastery, internalizing a proper attitude towards a transcendent God who will not deign to make his presence felt through sacred sites, objects, and times.

Thus, the mutation counter-narrative tells us that it was only through a particular conception of divinity that we first emerged from pre-modern porousness and became more “buffered,” able to distance ourselves from the “slight impressions, uncontrollable associations” and other immediate meanings to which the pre-modern self was subject. Selves charged with deliberately instantiating God’s plan rather than viscerally surrendering to his presence could be expected to develop a greater sense of “personal responsibility” vis-à-vis their immediate, pre-reflective sense of things’ meaning, to more reliably distinguish how things are from how they feel. And this made possible the kind of affect-control whose absence had previously permitted the rampant social and personal disorder that religion was now striving to extirpate. Medievalists who could not “love and hate to the utmost” and “stand [their] ground in the play of passions” were formerly compelled to retreat to the monastery. But with Religious Reform, it was *the monastery that now came to them* through the mediation of secular institutions. By secularizing the asceticism that had previously been reserved for other-worldly devotion, these

⁷¹ Ibid., pg. 771.

institutions created a world in which the innerness and self-reflexivity of the buffered self became a recipe for success rather than disaster.

These points were famously illustrated by Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which traces the rise of the sober, instrumental rationality of modern industrialized societies to Calvinist theology. We now articulate the meaning of capitalism in non-religious terms, as the regulated pursuit of rational self-interest, but Weber argued that capitalism was originally a source of "idealistic satisfactions."⁷² The ideal type of the capitalist "gets nothing out of his wealth for himself, except the irrational sense of having done his job well."⁷³ And this is because the unrelenting accumulation of capital and the instrumental attitudes it presupposes were originally embraced as evidence of a predestined salvation in the next world, rather than as the rational means to a happier existence in the present one, as they are now defended. For the concern with material accumulation reflected a deeper spiritual stance, out of which the Puritans sought to establish their status as among the elect gratuitously selected to receive a reprieve from the eternal damnation which all deserved. The Calvinist could not, of course, hope to actually impact that status, which had been predestined. But he could look for good signs and, in the process, help *produce* those signs through sober devotion to his calling, success in which was a possible harbinger of salvation. Unrelenting economic productivity was "the specific defense against all those temptations which Puritanism united under the name of the unclean life,"⁷⁴—an antidote to the "vain ostentation" and the "danger of relaxation,"⁷⁵ which constituted a harbinger of the eternal damnation which the Puritan was powerless to prevent but did everything in his power to refute.

As Barrett observes, Protestantism could, by "stripping away the wealth of images and symbols from medieval Christianity," unveil "nature as a realm of objects hostile to the spirit and to be conquered by puritan zeal and industry."⁷⁶ Since this despiritualization of nature was the corollary of God's unqualified transcendence, one could affirm this transcendence only by approaching nature as despiritualized, which one achieved by treating it as a collection of resources and instruments. We might say that the work of Religious Reform was to develop a *religious duty to behold the world in non-religious terms*, because this was the only way to properly worship the unqualified transcendence of a deity who would not so abase himself as to embed his divinity in the natural world, where it could become the target of human contrivance. And this kind of worship in turn presupposed the cultivation of a more regulated

⁷² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, (Dover, 2003), pg. 76.

⁷³ Ibid. pg. 71.

⁷⁴ Ibid. pg. 158.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pg. 157.

⁷⁶ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, pg. 27.

and predicable affect-structure in oneself. Hence the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, which emerged as the subjective correlate of a particular understanding of divinity, a sign that one was fulfilling the religious duty to behold the world in non-religious (that is, non-sacral) terms. Preoccupation with purely secular, worldly goods thereby became a source of religious meaning rather than religious dereliction, because there had now developed a sense in which secular-mindedness constituted submission before a religious imperative.

* * *

All this explains why secular modernity is not just the casting off of the confining horizons of a benighted past. The subtraction account directs our attention to skepticism before the supernatural. But such skepticism presupposes as its precondition that the natural and supernatural have been clearly distinguished, and the mutation counter-narrative tells us that *this very distinction itself had a religious foundation* as an achievement of Latin Christendom. It was, as Taylor puts it, “originally made to mark clearly the autonomy of the supernatural” and hence the “sovereign power of God.”⁷⁷ Only with the desacralization of the world effected by this conception of divinity could we come to see ourselves as confronting “the natural world” in the contemporary sense of that term, a world disenchanted of invasive spirits, and only after this could we then have proceeded ask whether the natural world is all that exists. Atheism and agnosticism presuppose the capacity to behold the world in a disenchanted fashion, as a place bereft of charged objects, places, and times. And this capacity was first cultivated as a spiritual aspiration, as the *sine qua non* of proper submission before God in his absolute transcendence. We tend to distinguish between those religions which have, and those which have not, adapted themselves to the demands of Enlightenment rationalism. But the upshot of the mutation counter-narrative is that this rationalism had its own religious predicates. Our modern, secularized outlook cannot be explained as arising straightforwardly out of the *erosion of traditional religious belief* because this outlook first develops through a *transformation of certain religious sensibilities* that was itself religiously inspired, as part and parcel of the building of renunciation into ordinary life.

This why Taylor can argue that “[e]xclusive humanism in a sense crept up on us through an intermediate form, Providential Deism; and both the Deism and the humanism were made possible by earlier developments within orthodox Christianity.”⁷⁸ This “intermediate form” of an impersonal god revealing himself through natural laws alone was necessary, not accidental, because we could not become

⁷⁷ Ibid., pg. 542.

⁷⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 19.

capable of doubting religion as such before religion itself first generated the capacity for such doubt by setting itself against the residual paganism represented by the earlier Christianity of the enchantment world. Mary Midgley observes that while we may anachronistically look back upon the Royal Society and the seventeenth-century mechanists as having waged a campaign against religion as such, they actually saw themselves as advocating on behalf of Christianity. Theirs was in fact a struggle against the *wrong kind* of religion—religion that reeked of pagan nature-worship—undertaken on behalf of the true faith, an intellectual God under whose auspices the physical world could be “scrubbed free from its animist accretions.”⁷⁹ As Taylor puts it, the fight against the enchanted world proceeded at first, not “because enchantment is totally untrue, but rather because it is necessarily ungodly.”⁸⁰ To view the world as an enchanted place pervaded by spirit forces was understood as an insult to transcendent sovereignty of God, which had been obscured by what became seen as Christianity’s earlier compromises with paganism and its embodied, undisciplined, and unreflective forms of spirituality. *This* is the soil in which “secularism” first grew.

Disenchantment, the de-sacralization of nature did not of itself erode theistic faith. On the contrary, it originated in a particular form of theistic faith centered upon disciplined disengagement. But it is what made this erosion *possible*, and so what indirectly set the stage for widespread atheism and skepticism. In “expelling the sacred from worship and social life,” Protestant spirituality “tends to drive out the enchantment of the world,” which becomes “progressively voided of its spirits and meaningful forces.”⁸¹ The buffered identity, and so our sense of ourselves as self-possessed strategic agents, is not just the logical byproduct of casting off certain mistaken beliefs but rather presupposes a transformation of human beings’ sense of themselves. And it was a particular kind of religion that promoted “the decentering from our lived experience which we have to carry through in order to become disciplined, rational, disengaged subjects.”⁸² It was a religion that first made possible a self defined by its “aware[ness] of the possibility of disengagement,”⁸³ a self that having a “sense of self-possession, of a secure inner mental realm...is no longer open, vulnerable to a world of spirits and forces which cross the boundary of the mind.”⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pgs. 81, 93.

⁸⁰ Ibid. pg. 80.

⁸¹ Ibid. pg. 83.

⁸² Ibid. pg. 742.

⁸³ Ibid. pgs. 42.

⁸⁴ 300-1.

Skepticism is now conceived as a purely cognitive attitude—something existing solely in what Elias calls the “contents of consciousness.” But that is only because we take for granted what was a “transformation of the whole human make-up,” take for granted the *religiously motivated affective renunciation* that skepticism presupposes. Secularization on the mutation counter-narrative is always the secularization of something that is not itself secular. And it was this religious renunciation that would eventually become secularized into modern skepticism. It would generate what Taylor calls a new “ethics of belief,” a new “view of our ethical predicament” according to which “we are strongly tempted, the more so, the less mature we are, to deviate from this austere principle, and give assent to comforting untruths.”⁸⁵ This assent became understood as a “sin against the austere principles of belief-formation” that defined this ethic, a kind of secular religion offering its own secularized conception of sin and apostasy. This was the soil on which what we now recognize as “liberal” sensibilities first grew. The characteristic features of strategic agency—careful planning, representing, and calculating—are not timeless human nature, but dispositions that developed historically as a form of religious discipline.

Having become established out of religious motivations, this capacity for disengagement could then assume a life of its own, as it were, and turn on those very motivations, turn on the very theological doctrines had first made the buffered self possible. The buffered identity is not what remains upon the subtraction of religion, but rather the medium through which what Hegel describes as the “thorough molding and interpenetration” of the secular world by religion transpires. That identity, which was first understood as the immanentization in human beings of God’s power to impose order on the self and the world,⁸⁶ outgrew its origins, generating “its own sense of dignity and power, its own inner satisfactions.”⁸⁷ This is why the modern, disengaged subject is a novel variant of a very old aspiration to spiritual purity, as we saw in the last chapter. For the instrumental stance could develop only after certain religious impulses were set in opposition to others, at which point the strong conceptions of the sacred which informed medieval Christianity could become viewed as a kind of residual paganism with which Christendom had been required to make its compromises but which was no part of the true faith.

4. A Peculiarly Courtly Rationality

However, these religious developments did not effectuate this transformation in human agency unaided, and were assisted by independent tendencies that were developing within secular circles. For

⁸⁵ Ibid., pg. 563.

⁸⁶ Ibid. pgs. 233-34.

⁸⁷ Ibid. pg. 262.

the work of religious Reform is supplemented by, and ends up colluding and becoming synthesized with, new ideals of self-discipline that grew in the great aristocratic and royal courts, where a similar ethos was being cultivated for different reasons and under different pressures, before being disseminated in conjunction with the work of Reform to other sectors of society.

The early Middle Ages, explains Elias, was marked by an extreme decentralization of power, in which myriad feudal lords enjoyed a comparative self-sufficiency, both economically and militarily. Here was a “wide landscape with its many castles and estates; the degree of integration is slight; the everyday dependence and thus the horizon of the bulk of warriors, like that of the peasants, is restricted to the immediate district.”⁸⁸ Here “the same living conditions are constantly reproduced,” and “uninterruptedly, production and consumption are carried on predominantly in the same place within the framework of the same economic unity,” where they are but minimally integrated within some broader economic system.⁸⁹ Being thus self-sufficient, the feudal nobility could operate in relative political independence of the king—and really of any overarching social forces. The king was their nominal lord, but social, economic, and technological conditions—poor transportation, the absence of an extensive money economy—severely constrained his actual power over them, rendering him merely the first among equals, if even that. For the king could not empower a noble to advance his interests—for example, by giving him a militarily defensible fief—without simultaneously empowering that vassal to act *against* his interests should new conditions incentivize this. A king or other liege lord could respond to such eventualities militarily, but he was powerless to prevent them through any routine structural impediments (like employment-at-will, performance reviews, and annual bonuses). The nobility might be overpowered militarily by a hostile neighbor, a perennial danger that was never far from mind. But this is merely to say that it was only “direct, physical, external compulsion” that could induce it to restraint. Absent were all the complex chains of interdependence through which power would later be exercised more subtly and genteelly.⁹⁰

The following centuries are marked by the gradually supersession of these centrifugal forces, as political competition drove many feudal lords into military conflict, with the winners of each struggle absorbing the territories of the losers. The circle of competitors was thus gradually narrowed, eventually leading to “the monopoly of one and finally—in conjunction with other mechanisms of integration such as processes of increasing capital formation and functional differentiation—the formation of the absolutist state.”⁹¹ With developments like a more extensive money economy, improved transportation

⁸⁸ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, pg. 467.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 319.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 319.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 444.

and communication networks, and no dearth of decisive battles, power became concentrated in ever fewer hands. And this in turn positioned monarchs to exercise power more directly—through dependent and therefore reliable salaried officials, for example—without surrendering the concrete mechanisms of power to persons of dubious and shifting loyalties. And so the monarchs gradually became lords of their realms, not only in name and right, but also in fact, thereby establishing the political and economic foundations of the modern state.

Beset on the one side by the ever-expanding political power of the centralized monarchies and on the other by the new economic prowess of an emerging bourgeoisie, the old feudal nobility found itself progressively emasculated, both militarily and economically, stripped of the glorious self-sufficiency that was the hallmark of an earlier, more anarchic period. Retaining any vestige of their former power and prestige now required, not physical prowess and military excellence, but cultivating the right relationships with the founts of power. And this, at its limit, came to mean taking up full-time residence in the absolutist monarchic court. One of the most decisive developments in the Western civilizing process, writes Elias, was *the transformation of warriors into courtiers*.⁹² For this political transition entailed a set of thoroughgoing psychological changes that would eventually spread beyond the monarchic courts and profoundly affect the identity of the modern West, shaping our basic concept of what it means to be “civilized.”

The affects of the independent, self-sufficient feudal lord of old had, like those of medievals in general, enjoyed “rather free and unfettered play in all the terrors and joys of life.”⁹³ The feudal lord’s time being “only very slightly subject to the continuous division and regulation imposed by dependence on others,” he did not develop a strict and stable super-ego through which compulsions stemming from others could be transformed into self-restraints.⁹⁴ But all this changes with the rise of the great royal courts of the absolutist period. Now “his value has its real foundation not in the wealth or even the achievements or ability of the individual, but in the favour he enjoys with the king, the influence he has with other mighty ones, his importance in the play of courtly cliques.”⁹⁵ Under these new conditions,

He is no longer the relatively free man, the master of his own castle, whose castle is his homeland. He now lives at court. He serves the prince. He waits on him at table. And at court he lives surrounded by people. He must behave toward each of them in exact accordance with their rank and his own. He must learn to adjust his gestures exactly to the different ranks and standing of the people at court, to measure his language exactly, and even to control his eyes exactly. It is a

⁹² Ibid., pg. 467.

⁹³ Ibid., pg. 319.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pg. 319.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pg. 476.

new self-discipline, an incomparably stronger reserve that is imposed on people by this new social space and the new ties of interdependence.⁹⁶

This new social space generated a new personality/affective structure, a new “peculiarly courtly rationality”⁹⁷ under whose aegis “the coarser habits, the wilder, more uninhibited customs of medieval society with its warrior upper classes, the corollaries of an uncertain, constantly threatened life” became “softened,” “polished,” and “civilized.”⁹⁸ Medieval mayhem and wantonness could become suppressed because it is only at this point in Western history, with the radical heightening of the level of the day-to-day, and indeed minute-to-minute, coercion which one individual was capable of exerting on another, that “the demand for ‘good behavior’ is raised more emphatically,” and that “[a]ll problems concerned with behavior take on new importance.”⁹⁹ To be sure, others and their interests always had to be reckoned with. But now the level of consideration which individuals expected of one another increases by orders of magnitude, as the “sense of what to do and what not to do in order not to offend or shock others becomes subtler”—and also more binding.¹⁰⁰ Occupying his social position with relative security, the individual knight of old was not obligated to banish coarseness and vulgarity from his life.¹⁰¹ But with the court having become a kind of “stock exchange” in which the individual’s value was continuously assessed, he could no longer afford this freedom.¹⁰² Gone were the days in which joking could lead to mockery and from there to violent disagreement and violence itself in the span of a few minutes. Gone too were the days in which one could leap from the most exuberant pleasure to the deepest despondency on the basis of slight impressions. For what now mattered were others’ impressions rather than one’s own, and the foremost task became impression-management, which also meant self-management.

A new self-consciousness emerges on the scene, not because essential human nature had been liberated from the confining horizons of a benighted past, but because a new social milieu *created inner depths out of outer necessity*. Whereas social and political standing were formerly determined by the sword and the skill with which one wielded it, it is now “[c]ontinuous reflection, foresight, and calculation, self-control, precise and articulate regulation of one’s own affects, knowledge of the whole terrain, human and non-human, in which one acts, [that] become more and more indispensable preconditions of social

⁹⁶ Ibid., pg. 177.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pg. 268.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pg. 268.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pg. 63.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pg. 64.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pg. 470.

¹⁰² Ibid., pg. 476.

success.”¹⁰³ People now “mold themselves more deliberately than in the Middle Ages,”¹⁰⁴ becoming increasingly disposed to “observe themselves and others.”¹⁰⁵ Directly or indirectly, the “intertwining of all activities with which everyone at court is inevitably confronted, compels...[the courtier] to observe constant vigilance, and to subject everything he says and does to minute scrutiny.”¹⁰⁶ It is in this context that Western man first becomes “psychological,” because it is here that “a more precise observation of others and oneself in terms of longer series of motives and causal connections” and a “vigilant self-control and perpetual observation of others” become the elementary prerequisites of social self-preservation.¹⁰⁷ With social status now depending on words rather than swords, “[s]tylistic conventions, the forms of social intercourse, affect-molding, esteem for courtesy, the importance of good speech and conversation, articulateness of language” assume a newfound importance.¹⁰⁸ “Good taste” achieves a new prestige value, as members of courtly society listen “with growing sensitivity to nuances of rhythm, tone and significance, to the spoken and written word.”¹⁰⁹ Every plebian expression was to be eliminated, replaced by language that was, like courtly etiquette generally, “clear, transparent, precisely regulated.”¹¹⁰

All of the self-aggrandizing impulses that formerly expressed themselves brutally, coarsely, and openly now assume a more “refined” form. Both pride in oneself and contempt for others now express themselves subtly and obliquely, through the manipulation of the intricate shades of social meaning which the peculiarly courtly rationality spawned. More primitive social arrangements unmarked by complicated chains of human interdependency generally encouraged either “unambiguously negative relationships, of pure, unmoderated enmity” or else “unmixed friendships, alliances, relationships of love and service.”¹¹¹ Hence, for example, what Elias describes as the “peculiar black-and-white colouring of many medieval books, which often know nothing but good friends or villains.”¹¹² But the extended chains of functional dependencies in which one was enmeshed at court—and which were simultaneously arising within the wider society as a whole—encouraged heretofore unknown levels of ambiguity, contradiction, and compromise in the feelings and behavior of people. These now became marked by “a co-existence of positive and negative elements, a mixture of muted affection and muted dislike in varying proportions

¹⁰³ Ibid., pg. 476.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pg. 63.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pg. 63.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pg. 466.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pg. 478.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pg. 30.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pg. 49.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pg. 13.

¹¹¹ Ibid., pg. 395.

¹¹² Ibid., pg. 395.

and nuances.”¹¹³ The courtiers had to become more calculating, less wholehearted in their sentiments—less “sincere” and “authentic,” we might say. Such was simply inevitable given the new intertwining layers of social interdependency. If people developed a new moral sophistication, this was the product, not of advancing knowledge, but of the gradual introjection of social exigencies, the muting of affect-structure required by the peculiarly courtly rationality.

This new social and psychological sophistication emerges hand-in-hand with the lowering of the threshold of shame, embarrassment, and repugnance in the social relations of the European upper classes, as “people, in the course of the civilizing process, seek to suppress in themselves every characteristic that they feel to be ‘animal.’”¹¹⁴ There was an intensification of disgust before the ejection of saliva, which becomes increasingly surrounded by taboos.¹¹⁵ Attitudes toward food, and meat in particular, also became transformed. Whereas the carving of a dead animal at table was previously a matter of indifference, or possibly pleasure, the new standard required eliminating any reminders that a meat dish has something to do with the killing of animals. The animal origin of meat dishes had to be “so concealed and changed by the art of its preparation and carving that while eating one is scarcely reminded of its origin.”¹¹⁶ In the same spirit, eating with one’s hands becomes increasingly taboo, as the fork and individual cutlery and crockery were introduced into the dining experience.

Many of these changes admitted of rational justifications, as in their hygienic value. But Elias emphasizes that only much later were they defended along these lines. Long before anything was known about saliva’s tendency to transmit germs, it became an object of social disgust.¹¹⁷ And if the handling of knives became regulated in an unprecedented fashion, so that it became inappropriate to point a knife at another’s face, the primary motivation was not any calculable danger, but “the general memory of and association with death and danger”—the fact that the knife carried a symbolic meaning that would have been unproblematic in an earlier period but was incongruous with the advancing internal pacification of society.¹¹⁸ Rather than reflecting any kind of rational foresight—a “demonstrable understanding of causal connections”—these changes evolved “over a long period and in conjunction with a specific change in human relationships.”¹¹⁹ They reflected the emergence of a new kind of identity predicated on ever-increasing distances between individuals and their animality. Whereas the subtraction account revolves

¹¹³ Ibid., pg. 395.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 98.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 130.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 130.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pg. 130.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pg. 100.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 94.

around the augmentation of knowledge and understanding, the mutation counter-narrative revolves around transformations in the overall human make-up. And Elias's account of the civilizing process reveals that the rationality which the subtraction account mistakes for timeless human nature was a late development, the fortuitous byproduct of contingent social forces that may have been anything but rational.

5. Church and State in Collusion

Clearly, the forms of drive-control that developed in courtly society differed in their underlying motivations from the this-worldly asceticism that grew out of Religious Reform, with its de-sacralization of nature, moralization of sin, and excarnation of faith. But as Elias observes, "the moderated restraint of the emotions and the disciplined shaping of behavior as a whole, which under the name of *civilité* have been developed in the upper class as a purely secular and social phenomenon, a consequence of certain forms of social life, have affinities to particular tendencies in traditional ecclesiastical behavior."¹²⁰ Both the peculiarly courtly rationality and Religious Reform commended a new form of self-restraint, the disengagement or buffering of consciousness vis-à-vis one's immediate impulses and experience. And so these tendencies gradually came to converge upon one another, if not in their theories and principles, then certainly in their ethos and practice.¹²¹

But this converging of the religious and the secular was at first something new and strange. Hence Father La Salle's complaint that "the majority of Christians regard decency and civility only as a purely human and worldly quality and, not thinking to elevate their minds more highly, do not consider it a virtue related to God, our neighbor, and ourselves." This, he lamented, "well shows how little Christianity there is in the world."¹²² La Salle's complaint seems strange today, given that religious traditionalists believe that their faith motivates just these virtues. But La Salle is writing during the early modern period, in the context of a world that has only recently begun to emerge from medieval resignation to sin and disorder, and so a world in which religion's role in the reformation of secular institutions and practices is only beginning to take shape and is far from obvious. La Salle owed his disappointment, not to the cynicism or laziness of his contemporaries as individual actors, but to the traditional resignation of medieval Christianity, the fact that Christianity had not seen fit to build renunciation into ordinary life until the emergence of his own likes. But this now changes, and Elias notes that "[c]lerical circles, above all, become

¹²⁰ Ibid., pg. 83.

¹²¹ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 103.

¹²² Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, pg. 83

popularizers of the courtly customs” and one of “the most important organs of the downward diffusion of [its] behavioral models.”¹²³

Whether marketed as religious demands or secular norms, civility and self-discipline were progressively diffused to ever-widening social circles:

The courtly society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and above all the courtly nobility of France that forms its centre, occupies a specific position within this whole movement of the interpenetration of the patterns of conduct of ever-widening circles....[T]he courtiers did not originate or invent the muting of affects and the more even regulation of conduct. They, like everyone else in this movement, were bending to the constraints of interdependence that were not planned by any individual person or group of persons. But it is in this courtly society that the basic stock of models of conduct is formed which then, fused with others and modified in accordance with the position of the groups carrying them, spread, with the compulsion to exercise foresight, to ever-wider circles of function.¹²⁴

The peculiarly courtly rationality was originally bound up with social status, functioning as it did to suppress conduct that signaled disrespect for others’ superior rank. But this rationality was gradually uprooted from its original social context, at which point the prohibited impulses became condemned as intrinsically objectionable. These were now affronts, not to particular individuals in particular social positions, but to civilization as such, and so were all the more radically repressed.¹²⁵ This altered the contents of the peculiarly courtly rationality in some ways. The kind of drive-control cultivated in the courts differed from the kind that developed in other social sectors. Bourgeois professional and commercial functions, for example, placed less emphasis on manners and delicacy of speech, while demanding an overall greater intensity of drive-control, especially as regards sexuality.¹²⁶ But whatever the cultural variations to which it became subject, the courtly ethos in combination with new forms of disenchanted religiosity collaborated to effectuate a widespread “buffering” of the human identity in the West.

With the increasing division of labor and extension of trade networks, individuals now live in closer proximity and become bound to one another in ever more complex relations of social and functional interdependence. The lengthier and more elaborate became the chains of social interdependency, the more strenuous became the demands on drive control, until this control is “instilled in the individual from his earliest years as an automatism, a self-compulsion that he cannot resist even if he consciously wishes to.”¹²⁷ The moderation of spontaneous emotion, the extension of mental space

¹²³ Ibid., pg. 83.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pg. 465.

¹²⁵ Ibid., pgs. 123-131.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pg. 504.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pg. 445.

beyond the moment into the past and future, and the habit of connecting events in terms of cause and effect are not timeless human faculties, but specific transformations in the human make-up made possible by the monopolization of physical violence in the state and the social interdependencies this created.¹²⁸ Only on this basis did ever-widening segments of the population develop the “strict, continuous, and uniform” modes of drive-control that were earlier to be found only among monks and courtiers.¹²⁹

The development of modernity can thus be viewed as the *democratization of courtly civility and secularization of monkish asceticism*. Principles of behavior that were originally deployed to tame an unruly military aristocracy through court service or estate management were, over later centuries, deployed to tame the general population¹³⁰—to which end religion became conscripted, offering as it did a theological justification for disciplining wide swaths of the population away from the wantonness and license of an earlier period. Thus, explains Taylor, did the ethic of “active state intervention,” promoted by absolutistic governments combine with Calvinism in order to “introduce a rationalized, disciplined, professionalized mode of life” into the populace as a whole.¹³¹ These “ordering impulses” sought to “create a stable order in society by training people into ‘settled courses,’ through dedication to some profession, whose goals were defined in terms of service to our fellow human beings: in the private sector, through productive labor.”¹³²

The subtraction account obscures that modern notions of individual self-interest were built atop a systematic program of social engineering through which older *passions*, like an ethic of military adventures, were replaced by new ones, like an ethic of disciplined production. This engineering eroded the power of some traditional repressions. But it also reduced “diversity” in important ways. While we now tolerate a greater diversity of formal creed than did the medieval world, we also tolerate a lesser diversity of human make-ups and ways of being. The modern order was marked, not by increasingly universal tolerance, but by a highly interventionist and uniformizing spirit, a desire, as Taylor says, to “apply a single model or schema to everything and everybody” and to “eliminate anomalies, exceptions,

¹²⁸ Ibid., pg. 448.

¹²⁹ Ibid., pg. 330; “The civilizing of the state, the constitution, education, and therefore of broader sections of the population, the liberation from all that was still barbaric or irrational in existing conditions, whether it be the legal penalties or the class restrictions on the bourgeoisie or the barriers impeding a freer development of trade—this civilizing must follow the refinement of manners and the internal pacification of the country by the kings.” (TCP 39)

¹³⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 124; Erasmus writes “Modesty, above all, befits a boy,...and particularly a noble boy...Let others paint lions, eagles, and other creatures on their coats of arms. More true nobility is possessed by those who can inscribe on their shields all that they have achieved through the cultivation of the arts and sciences.” (TCP 59)

¹³¹ Ibid., pg. 119.

¹³² Ibid., pg. 119.

marginal populations, and all kinds of non-conformists.”¹³³ Deviant individuals and populations may have been to one degree or another stigmatized and disadvantaged in pre-modern societies. But it was only with the rise of the modern order that they become targeted for wholesale rehabilitation. For the buffered identity had now become the only “normal” and “healthy” way to be.

These interventions were implemented, not by the unwashed, uneducated masses, whom we today associate with the homogenizing impulse but, on the contrary, by various elites, who assumed responsibility for inculcating stricter control of impulses and emotions in their social inferiors well before this function was democratized through the bourgeois family.¹³⁴ The older feudal nobility basked in its open displays of contempt for the wretchedness of the lower orders. It therefore made no effort to eliminate that wretchedness, since it was by way of this contrast that it valorized itself.¹³⁵ But it has always been the quintessential ambition of modern elites, Taylor writes, to “make over the whole society, to change the lives of the mass of people, and make them conform better to certain models which carried strong conviction among these elites.”¹³⁶ Modern elites are more egalitarian and less openly arrogant, but for this reason also more meddlesome, more paternalistic, and less tolerant. Believing that they embody what are universal ideals, they see themselves not so much as superior as more “advanced.” And this lays on them a special responsibility to reform those who have not yet achieved their exalted state.

The elites executed this responsibility, Taylor explains, by erecting a new “police state” charged with instilling the new rationality,¹³⁷ charged with ensuring that these lower orders be “not left as they are, but badgered bullied, pushed, preached at, drilled, and organized to abandon their lax and disordered folkways and conform to one or another feature of civil behavior.”¹³⁸ By contrast with medieval Christianity’s resignation to our fallen lot, Religious Reform was characterized by a new moral perfectionism and puritanism, by a “humorless determination to castigate sin and disorder, a denial of ambiguity and complexity in unmixed condemnation.” Hence the elites’ efforts “to abolish carnivalesque and ludic practices, on the grounds that they sew disorder, mix pagan and Christian elements, and are a breeding ground of vice.”¹³⁹ These elites’ theoretical emphases may have tended more religious or more secular, or consisted in some combination thereof. But they all shared in the same underlying spirit of

¹³³Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 86.

¹³⁴ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, pg. 112.

¹³⁵ Ibid., pg. 172

¹³⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 85.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pg. 86.

¹³⁸ Ibid., pg. 102.

¹³⁹ Ibid., pg. 87.

moralistic humorlessness, the same contempt for the social and personal disorder toward which the masses were unreflectively resigned.

Being relatively disordered themselves, earlier elites had, like medieval society in general, been resigned to sin and disorder. But modern elites lose any sense of the mutual complementarity and interdependence of order and chaos.¹⁴⁰ No longer seeing human beings as opened out to anti-structure, they could come to believe that a perfect human code is possible.¹⁴¹ With human beings no longer being subject to the unpredictable invasiveness of both the sacred and the diabolical, there remained no excuse for tolerating a level of disorder that had once been considered inevitable, and a disorder that now threatened the stability of political economy and the nation-state. Hence Foucault's argument that whereas power in feudal societies operated only intermittently and inefficiently through levies, war, and sundry rituals of fealty to the liege lord, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries transformed power into a more all-pervasive and uninterrupted affair, "a matter of obtaining productive service from individuals in their concrete lives." This being the aim, the exercise of power came to involve the minute regulation of acts, attitudes, and everyday behavior, the subjecting of bodies to "highly complex systems of manipulation and conditioning."¹⁴² Whereas older elites merely sought to maintain a self-serving balance of power, the new ones sought to extend their influence beyond the externals of behavior. They demanded not only obedience but conformity, which meant new forms of self-control and self-reflexivity that were conducive to a more regulated, and hence more predictable, relationship to one's own impulses.

The new disciplines extended to the experience of time itself. Time had previously been informed by strong conceptions of the sacred. Ordinary time was understood to be "punctuated" through its relationship to certain privileged "high points" defined by pivotal religious revelations of the past, points where, as Taylor says, "the ordinary sequences of events touches higher time."¹⁴³ But now time became disenchanted and linear, radically purged of any such connection to the higher.¹⁴⁴ With ordinary time having assumed an absolute value that it previously lacked, it became subject to constraints and regulations never before imagined. So all-encompassing have "the disciplines of our modern civilized order" become, writes Taylor, that they have "led us to measure and organize time as never before in human history." They have transformed time into "a precious resource, not to be 'wasted,'" creating a

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pg. 124.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., pg. 51.

¹⁴² Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pgs. 61, 66-67.

¹⁴³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 209.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pg. 196

“tight, ordered time environment” that “has enveloped us, until it comes to seem like nature.”¹⁴⁵ Though this radically-purged time consciousness might be seen as a mere *liberation* from the misbegotten religious beliefs that previously sustained a sacralized conception of time, the mutation counter-narrative reveals it as concomitantly the *imposition* of a particular identity, as the forcible buffering of the human agent vis-à-vis his own default impulses and experiences.

Sexuality no less than time became the object of social control. Just like uninhibited immersion in an enchanted world of “charged” objects, places, and times, uninhibited sexuality posed an obstacle to the emerging disciplinary society, to the affective and instinctual stability required to navigate an increasingly complex and differentiated social environment. And so sex was, Elias writes, “removed behind the scenes of social life and enclosed in a particular enclave, the nuclear family,” as something that “even among adults...is referred to officially only with caution and circumlocutions.”¹⁴⁶ Traditional Christianity is often accused of harboring an ingrained hostility towards all things sexual. But whatever the truth of these charges on the level of theological doctrine, it was only with the rise of the modern, *secular* order that this putative hostility becomes translated into effective prohibitions, restrictions, and taboos for the mass of people.

Whereas the secular realm was formerly seen as a necessary compromise with a fallen world, a sphere in which violence, license, and disorder were simply unavoidable, it had now become the medium through which to realize a renunciatory ethos. The religious and the secular become increasingly separated at the level of formal doctrine in the sense that political rule becomes decreasingly reliant on theological justifications, but the two spheres increasingly *converge* on the level of social practice and ethos, on the level of the “overall human make-up.” With the religious becoming worldly and the secular becoming renunciatory, the old oppositions of the medieval period softened or collapsed, fusing into a this-worldly, secularized asceticism. In a sense, secularization meant *the transformation of Christianity from an avowedly unrealizable theory and ideal to an actively enforced practice*. The theological rationales fell in prestige. But what was officially lost on the level of theology was unofficially compensated for at the level of affective-instinctual structure, which *translated the theology into the very structure of human agency*. Modernity and secularity are not a general and undifferentiated subtraction of antiquated illusions and limitations of knowledge, but as a *specific* and *focused* subtraction of the residual pagan tendencies, including pagan tolerance, which had heretofore impeded this transformation.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pg. 59.

¹⁴⁶ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 148.

6. A Spiritual-Secular Whole

This widespread buffering of the human agent comes to define, not only our individual relationship to our own impulses, but also our civilizational relationship to our past and to other cultures that seem to resemble it. The buffered identity now constitutes the lens through which we measure our distance from earlier ages, informing our basic historical sense of our civilization as a distinctive age having overcome the unreflective default settings of all preceding periods. Taylor writes:

The buffered distance becomes part of the complex modern-European concept of “civilization”, developing since the Renaissance notion of “civility”, and becomes a crucial part of our own historicized self-awareness, whereby we place ourselves to our own “barbarian” past, and to other, less fortunate peoples. Woven into the other elements—literacy and education, personal self-discipline, development of the productive arts, a sense of decorum, government and respect for law—which make up this developing ideal of civility..., this new kind of invulnerability and distance takes its place, inflecting the ideals of discipline, education, decorum, and good political order.¹⁴⁷

But *what precisely we are to make* of this “historicized self-awareness” turns on the kind of history with which we are operating, turns on whether we interpret its meaning through the subtraction account or through the mutation counter-narrative. The fulcrum of the subtraction account is the progressive falling aside of untenable religious and metaphysical beliefs. But the dispositive fact for the mutation counter-narrative is that tensions within Christianity working in conjunction with congruous secular developments generated a *new kind of identity, a new sense of human agency*. It is *this*, and not mere knowledge and rationality, that provides us with a “new kind of invulnerability” and foremost distinguishes us from “other, less fortunate peoples.”

Modern societies aspire to what Taylor calls the “mutual service conception of order” or “order of mutual benefit”—our contemporary social imaginary of rational agents pursuing their rational interests in a fashion that respects the rights, opinions, and interests of others. And the subtraction account conceptualizes this development as the logical byproduct of superseding the various forms of vain-glory which swept up individuals great and small in the medieval period. But this is to overlook how this supersession presupposed, not mere enlightenment about social causality—as per Hobbes—but the transformation of human beings to the point where they could cognize that causality. And this in turn presupposes the development of a disciplinary society, which went hand in hand with “secularization.” Secularization is not the negation of religion but the process by which the secular became more religious and the religious became more secular. An alliance between religious Reform and the secular disciplines of the peculiarly courtly rationality gradually “compre[sse[d]]” the “dualistic world of mediaeval

¹⁴⁷Ibid., pg. 301.

Christianity” into a “spiritual-secular whole,”¹⁴⁸ creating a *courtly-ascetic ethos* that reconstitutes the elements of medieval Christianity into a new secular vision. Modernity is not the bare subtraction of a pre-modern past, but something that developed as impulses that were marginal and sequestered within certain discrete social enclaves during the pre-modern period—i.e., ascetic renunciation and courtly gentility—gradually assume preeminence over erstwhile dominant ones, becoming fused with the general life of the wider population and detached from their pre-modern justifications.

The mutation counter-narrative is not just a causal or historical thesis about the preconditions of modernity—for example, the claim that certain modern ideas conceived in a certain way derived from pre-modern antecedents—but the stronger, *ontological* thesis that what modernity *is* cannot be understood apart from the process through which it developed. For what the subtraction account represents as “underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside” are within the mutation counter-narrative the outgrowths and sublimations of what that account misconstrues as having been entirely set aside. The mutation counter-narrative tracks what Taylor terms the “sedimentation of the past in the present,”¹⁴⁹ the fact that religious modes of being characteristic of previous ages have been *incorporated* into our contemporary secular self-understanding. What is “derived” from the past is not merely our ideas but our *consciousness*, our pre-reflective experience of agency. For the upshot of the mutation counter-narrative is that historically bequeathed tendencies which no longer manifest themselves theoretically *in terms of ideas* nevertheless continue to manifest themselves in other, equally consequential ways, on the pre-reflective, pre-theorized level of feeling and sensation, in *the overall make-ups of human beings* as they have developed.

* * *

Asking what “conquered the Christian God,” Nietzsche proffers that it was “Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness taken more and more strictly, the confessional subtlety of the Christian conscience translated and sublimated into the scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price.” Atheism is not the simple negation of religious faith, but a human possibility that was historically created by such faith, the final outcome of Christianity’s protracted and disciplined cultivation of the *ascetic ideal*. Nietzsche writes:

Everywhere else that the spirit is strong, mighty, and at work without counterfeit today, it does without ideals of any kind—the popular word for this abstinence is “atheism”—*except for its will to truth*. But this will, this *remnant* of an ideal is, if you will believe me, this ideal itself in its

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 267.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. pg. 268.

strictest, most spiritual formulation, esoteric through and through with all external additions abolished, and thus not so much its remnant as its *kernel*. Unconditional honest atheism (and *its* is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age!) is therefore *not* the antithesis of that ideal, as it appears to be; it is rather only one of the latest phases of its evolution, one of its terminal forms and inner consequences—it is the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*.¹⁵⁰

Considered strictly along the axis of religious belief, Nietzsche is advancing what seems like a subtraction account of modernity, with God representing an illusion of which we are now becoming free. But along the axis of human agency—that is, the overall human make-up—Nietzsche recognizes an underlying continuity between a religious ideal of self-castigation and the disengaged scientific stance, whose spiritual roots can be discerned in theistic religion and its ascetic demands for “abstinence”—precisely the abstinence of which the porous, pre-modern self was incapable. It was the ascetic impulses inherent to Christian theism that first demanded the buffering vis-a-vis lived experience that is presupposed by atheism and secularism. Skepticism about religion developed, not through the extirpation of undisciplined habits of mind but, on the contrary, through religiously inculcated discipline. The quest for truth had to first be cultivated as a religious ideal before it could be recognized as a secular one, before it could become uprooted from, and then turn against, the theological soil that first nourished it.

The scientific stance presupposes, not a mere augmentation of knowledge, but a fundamental alteration in our self-understandings as agents, a buffering vis-à-vis the “peculiarly human emotions.” Elias observes:

The development of the idea that the earth circles round the sun in a purely mechanical way in accordance with natural laws—that is, in a way not in the least determined by any purpose relating to mankind, and therefore no longer possessing any great emotional significance for men—presupposed and demanded at the same time a development in human beings themselves toward increased emotional control, a greater restraint of their spontaneous feeling that everything they experience and everything that concerns them takes its stamp from them, is the expression of an intention, a destiny, a purpose relating to themselves.¹⁵¹

Non-anthropocentricity required, not just knowledge, but a change in people’s basic sense of themselves toward a new kind of self-restraint. For it was only this that could reign in the teleological libertinism that will not distinguish the subjective realm of the mind from the objective realm of fact. This presupposed disenchantment. And whereas the subtraction account associates disenchantment with the growing preeminence of scientific reason, the mutation counter-narrative traces it to excarnated religion and its disciplinary tendencies. It was these that inculcated a this-worldly asceticism that would eventually

¹⁵⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books 1989), pg. 160.

¹⁵¹ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, pg. 209.

become secularized into the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. This ethos is not the subtraction of contingent illusions, but a positive construction that is itself just as contingent as these illusions.

The subtraction account and the mutation counter-narrative both concur with Stolzenberg that “the concept of the secular has itself, ironically, been secularized.” But the mutation counter-narrative adds the *further irony* that this secularization was driven by a religious vision. Given that the secular was from the very beginning bound up with a wider religious cosmology, it could not really have gone otherwise. The concept of the secular being the mirror image and corollary of the concept of the divine, modifying the former had to involve modifying the latter. And these origins have shaped what it now *means* to be secular, and this is *to have absorbed the religion that has been compressed into the secular*. Gillespie writes:

What actually occurs in the course of modernity is thus not simply the erasure or disappearance of God but the transference of his attributes, essential powers, and capacities to other entities or realms of being. The so-called process of disenchantment is thus also a process of reenchancement in and through which both man and nature are infused with a number of attributes or powers previously ascribed to God. To put the matter more starkly, in the face of the long drawn out death of God, science can provide a coherent account of the whole only by making man or nature or both in some sense divine.¹⁵²

The subtraction account posits a non-religious core of human nature—perhaps the desire for autonomy or for preference-maximization—and then explains religious belief as an overlay which was formerly necessary to explain natural phenomena or cope with life’s difficulties. The mutation counter-narrative, by contrast, posits teleological categories of thought and feeling, not as epistemic adaptations to circumstances, but as human agency’s default setting, and a setting that remains with us even when it has supposedly been superseded. This is why modernity is merely the transference of God’s powers and attributes to other realms of being, a transference that has been facilitated by religion itself. Only because divinity was first dis-embedded from the world, exalted as an unqualified transcendence whose directives no longer directly permeated nature, could the conceptual and spiritual space for “nature” and the human will be opened up. And this means that though God may no longer speak to us through the sacred, he remains with us in our idealization of the will—i.e., buffered disengagement—and of nature as non-anthropocentrically beholden by that will. The mutation counter-narrative therefore reveals what Gillespie calls “the concealed wellsprings of our own passions.”¹⁵³ And as we will later see, these wellsprings are the crypto-theology that conservative claims of cultural oppression discern in liberalism.

¹⁵² Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, pg. 274.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg. xii.

What turns on the contest between the subtraction account and the mutation counter-narrative is whether we accept the buffered identity at *face value*. The subtraction account identifies modernity and secularity with the emergence individual freedom, social tolerance, and diversity, the gradual eclipse of hegemonic social norms and receding of overbearing social restraint. This is, we observed with Gillespie, the self-congratulatory story that modernity tells about itself. And self-congratulation is indeed in order if we attend solely to things like democracy, religious tolerance, and human rights. But the mutation counter-narrative reveals this to be a one-sided picture. Elias writes:

The firmer, more comprehensive and uniform restraint of the affects characteristic of this civilizational shift, together with the increased internal compulsions that, more implacably than before, prevent all spontaneous impulses from manifesting themselves directly and motorically in action, without the intervention of control mechanisms—these are what is experienced as the capsule, the invisible wall dividing the “inner world” of the individual from the “external world” or, in different versions, the subject of cognition from its object, the “ego” from the “other,” the “individual” from “society.” What is encapsulated are the retrained instinctual and affective impulses denied direct access to the motor apparatus. They appear in self-perception as what is hidden from all others, and often as the true self, the core of individuality.¹⁵⁴

The buffered identity facilitates a certain kind of individual liberation vis-à-vis some historically bequeathed social illusions, which is what the subtraction account renders salient. But the latter also occludes from view any sense that this liberation has been facilitated by certain novel social *inhibitions*, the final internalization of the heightened affective-instinctual restraint demanded by the modern order. For the new standards of self-control came to encompass the individual’s entire conduct “like a tight ring,” continuously subordinating his every individual drive to a steadily expanding web of social norms that were previously nonexistent or unenforced.¹⁵⁵ And it is *this* which first produced the “individualism” invoked in modernity’s self-congratulatory account of itself. Individuals may have gained the liberty to sell their labor to the highest bidder as the feudal serf could not. But earlier social constraints were replaced by new, *internalized*, constraints, the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. If the modern social world appears, as Berger says, less “firm” than the pre-modern one, the reason is that much of the firmness was *transplanted*—and *not* subtracted—from the order of institutions and traditions into the emotional life of the individual. What Berger characterizes as the previously unfathomed “depth” of modern subjectivity is simply the outcome of this transplantation.

Whereas the subtraction account *naturalizes* the “the retrained instinctual and affective impulses denied direct access to the motor apparatus” as the ordinary human desire which remains upon the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 211.

¹⁵⁵ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, pg. 452.

discarding of religious and metaphysical illusions, the mutation counter-narrative reveals these desires as the internalized refraction of particular social pressures. The distinctive interiority of the modern self is not an underlying feature of human nature that had been artificially suppressed by illusory teleological hierarchies, but the product of particular forms of social interdependency.¹⁵⁶ What the subtraction account upholds as plainspoken “fulfillment,” is more thickly described what Elias calls “a particular moulding of the whole personality,” a molding that “emerges more strongly the more clearly and totally the spontaneous impulses of the individual threaten to bring about, through the structure of human dependencies, loss of pleasure, decline and inferiority in relation to others, or even the ruin of one’s social existence.”¹⁵⁷ The ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity is merely the introjected reflection of these dangers, a *social* ideal suited for a particular social terrain.

This provides the context for my argument in the last chapter that the self-understanding of modernity is distorted inasmuch as it mistakes the disengaged lucidity of the strategic agent for a primordial phenomenon that simply *displaces* the teleological immersion of pre-moderns. For the disengaged strategic agent is rather a derivative phenomenon that has been as it were *superimposed* on that immersion. And so it remains in its own way permeated by and extended over a “field of social meanings,” which is what structures the concrete shapes the disagreement assumes. This chapter has now provided the wider backdrop to this argument. For we can now see that whereas the subtraction account is a story of displacement, the mutation counter-narrative is a story of superimposition. It is the historical record of the various mechanisms, both religious and secular, by means of which porous selves unselfconsciously acquiescing in the “Field Theory of Man” were progressively compelled to “turn back” on themselves and assume a posture of reflective disengagement extricated from the field of social meanings to which they were formerly subject. But the extrication is indeed just a posture, the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry thereof, because it was itself facilitated by various *mutations* in a field of social meanings that emerged from out of the compression of the religious and the secular into the courtly-ascetic ethos, into the buffered distance. While we may see ourselves as self-possessedly operating in a “neutral environment,” that environment is in fact structured by these origins, and so is less neutral than it appears.

This chapter also provides the wider backdrop to the conservative suspicions examined earlier, foremost among these the suspicion that liberalism is a hero-system in disguise rather than the transcendence of all hero-systems. The subtraction account understands the distinctive *innerness* of the

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 203.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pg. 203.

buffered identity as what remains upon transcending the constraints which heretofore obscured and suppressed it—as a “shift” in the “accent of reality” from “the objective order of institutions to the realm of subjectivity” as Berger says. Seeing only this liberated subjectivity, it cannot recognize what Taylor calls “the possibility that Western modernity might be sustained by its own original spiritual vision.”¹⁵⁸ For all that remains upon this supersession is an unvarnished lucidity that by its very nature admits of no further analysis. But it is precisely the development of an original spiritual vision—that is, a distinctive hero-system—which the mutation counter-narrative chronicles, because it reveals the historical elements from which our modern innerness was *constructed*. It comprehends the buffered identity as refracting the specific historical forces which brought it into being and so permits us to recognize modern humanism, not as a bare elimination of superstition, but as something more ambiguous, more contingent and artificial, a particular hero-system that is, as Taylor says, “marked by the process which brings it about, by its activism, uniformization, homogenization, rationalization, and of course by its hostility to enchantment and equilibrium.”¹⁵⁹

With its fixation on changes in what Elias calls “the contents of consciousness,” the subtraction account cannot recognize changes in the *form* of consciousness, in the untheorized background of our cogitation that is simply assimilated to an undifferentiated common sense. The subtraction account must therefore classify the “activism, uniformization, homogenization, rationalization” that created the modern world as just utility-enhancing expedients, just rational means to the “fulfillment” that we ultimately care about. But the mutation counter-narrative reveals that these tendencies have actually shaped that fulfillment’s concrete meaning for us. Having been inflected by the courtly-ascetic ethos, our commitment to the buffered distance—to “literacy and education, personal self-discipline, development of the productive arts, a sense of decorum, government and respect for law”—incorporates imperatives that might not have become integral to these ideals’ contemporary meanings under a different set of historical and cultural circumstances—had the path toward greater social and hence organismic integration proceeded in another way, in response to a different range of pressures. Those who identify with the buffered distance certainly do not see themselves as subject to the push and pull of the inhibitions atop of which this identity was erected. On the contrary, they may see themselves as particularly insightful vis-à-vis the artifices of social life and so as having, to that degree, transcended any visceral and reflexive subjection to them. But that is because these inhibitions have been so internalized as to mold the whole personality, and so preempt the emergence of any recalcitrant desires. For the very

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. pg. 572.

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 88.

dignity of the buffered stance with its encapsulated innerness obscures the heteronomy that is at its very origin, obscures that this dignity is in the end but the “the retrained instinctual and affective impulses denied direct access to the motor apparatus.”

This heteronomy is why motivations that might get articulated in terms of “fulfillment,” in hedonic or perhaps utilitarian or quasi-utilitarian terms, nevertheless operate in continuous interaction with the imperative to satisfactorily position oneself vis-à-vis an order of things. This imperative—the pre-modern residuum as I put it in Chapter 4—is not anything so ostentatious or obviously questionable as the Great Chain of Being of old, and consists rather in a sense of teleology *embodying the very historical developments that I have been charting*. The buffered identity is an identity predicated on the contemporary *reenactment* of those developments and must therefore posit the buffered distance against anything that could be construed as undignified submission to unreflective “folkways” or embodied religious feeling. It is this opposition that structures and determines the concrete meaning of our putatively secular aspirations, whose actual operations are imperceptibly rooted in a spiritual drive to which our articulated self-conceptions do not do justice. There can be an “inextinguishable drunkenness” underneath the putative sobriety of a secular, rationalistic social order because what the subtraction account represents in purely negative terms, as a brute refusal and elimination, conceals a positive *drive* to instantiate the courtly-ascetic ethos in novel ways. The buffered distance understands itself as a condition achieved. But it is, on the mutation counter-narrative, only the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of a conditioned achieved—a continuing ideal and imperative that seeks its realization under the cover of its own official self-understanding and, in so doing, operates in fundamental contravention of its own principles.

Chapter Six

The Mutation Counter-Narrative Applied

The argument of the preceding chapter may seem abstruse. But as we shall now see, its significance is concretized in the phenomenon which we have come to know as conservative claims of cultural oppression. For these claims are at their core a protest against the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity and the subtraction account which legitimates these as an “underlying feature of human nature” whose fullest liberation would propel one toward liberalism. Lino Graglia writes,

Whatever the reason, American academics and others who live professionally in a world of words tend overwhelmingly to be people of the left with adversarial attitudes to the beliefs and traditions of most of their fellow citizens. Across the spectrum of basic social policy issues—capital punishment, prayer in the schools, suppression of pornography, swift and effective enforcement of the criminal law, busing for school racial balance, and so on—their views and the views of most Americans could hardly be more opposed.

The nightmare of the typical American intellectual, therefore, is that public policymaking should fall into the hands of the American people.¹

Graglia’s phrasing and choice of words—“whatever the reason,” “adversarial attitudes”— suggest that he is uncertain as to what precisely could imbue the pattern of attitudes and policy preferences he opposes with any conceptual coherence whatsoever. But there is an underlying coherence. For the “adversarial attitudes” held by most intellectuals toward the beliefs and traditions of their fellow citizens are *none other than the buffered distance*, none other than the “historicized self-awareness” that posits itself in opposition to the “less fortunate peoples” of a barbarian past. If public policymaking cannot be permitted to fall into the hands of the American people, this is because the American people refuse the buffered distance, because they are too mired in their unreflective folkways and too indulgent of their embodied religious feelings to accede to the civilizing process that liberals would impose upon them.

What we have come to know as the culture wars are not just the recent invention of Republican political strategists. For they are most profoundly understood as a *contemporary recapitulation* of the culture wars between moderns and pre-moderns detailed in the last chapter, the *reenacting* by other means of the same structural oppositions between the “default” dispositions of the pre-modern, porous self and the disciplinary demands leveled the buffered identity and its courtly-ascetic ethos. The difference between conservatives and liberals is not that one group is more or less individualistic, or more or less communitarian, than the other—though these distinctions can illuminate some things some of the

¹ Lino A. Graglia, *Romer v. Evans: The People Foiled Again by the Constitution*, 68 U. Colo. L. Rev 409, 412 (1997).

time—but that that liberals have more thoroughly internalized the secularized asceticism of the buffered identity. While there are many spheres of human activity where liberals and conservatives have internalized this identity to similar degrees—for example, table etiquette, the basics of interpersonal courtesy, aversion to animal cruelty—there are others—cultural, educational, political, and religious—where they have not. And it is precisely these spheres that are the sites for the culture wars.

The official bones of contention would seem altogether distinct from those at play during the original civilizing process. The targets of the elites’ “ordering impulses” were once such things as the borderline pagan religiosity of those who manipulated charged objects, the peasantry’s predilection for malingering at the expense of productive labor and for village-consciousness at the expense of nation-consciousness, its raucous and often violent street carnivals, and most importantly the honor ethic of the warrior classes, whose vainglorious impulses were quite incompatible with the smooth functioning of a commercial society. Today, the targets have come to consist in rather different things—the retributivist impulses that drive support for capital punishment (and even “swift and effective enforcement of the criminal law”), the self-indulgent sentimentalism that would assign personhood to a fetus on the basis of appearance alone, the impatient exhibitionism that cannot wait until the close of the school day before beseeching the Almighty. But while the theoretical *content* of these two sets of oppositions are largely distinct, they mirror one another on the *structural* level. They are both struggles between modern self-control and pre-modern impulsivity, between the demand for strategic disengagement and the embedded, unreflective “folkways” against which those demands are leveled.

Contrasting liberals and conservatives as moderns and pre-moderns may seem like rhetorical license rather than serious analysis. For it seems more plausible to contrast liberalism and conservatism as two different kinds of individualism both of which are wholly modern. In this vein, Taylor argues that today’s cultural conservatives are heirs to the “instrumental individualism” that flourished in the Nineteenth Century and whose moral pillars were family, nation, and religion.² The “expressive individualism” championed by liberals then comes on the scene in the mid-Twentieth Century and either supplements or supplants the earlier variety of individualism with new ideals of authenticity, championing a conception of society with no necessary connection to the sacred.³ As different as these are, both are thoroughly “modern” in the strict sense of the term. Both conceptualize social institutions as the creations

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), pg. 506.

³ *Ibid.* pgs. 471-490.

of citizens. And so both can be contrasted the older dispensation in which the social order was understood to have “since time out of mind” pre-existed the wills of concrete individuals.⁴

This conceptualization is not inaccurate and may be preferable for some purposes. But my argument is that the relationship between these two forms of individualism recapitulates the relationship between the modern and pre-modern. Conservatives are not the porous selves of medieval Europe finding themselves perennially “invaded” by spirits bringing them within their “field of force.” Nor do they engage in “ludic intervals” marked by violence, sexual license, and role reversal. But we can imagine a continuum between such selves and Graglia’s “typical American intellectual,” a continuum defined by the degree to which and range of spheres in which the buffered identity has been internalized, the degree to which the agent’s horizon of meaning is relatively buffered or relatively porous. With conservatives standing for whatever reasons “further back along the way” than liberals, they are less accepting of forms of disciplined, disengaged agency embraced by those “who live professionally in a world of words.” This is what makes conservatives “pre-modern” in the specific sense I am intending here. However precisely the “modern stretch” of this continuum is demarcated from the pre-modern one as a matter of cultural or intellectual history, it can in turn be subdivided in a way that mirrors the original division between modern and pre-modern. Modern and pre-modern as I am using the terms refer to different forms of consciousness, not different ideas, and this is why they can admit of *degrees*.

Liberals often accuse conservatives of rejecting modernity. They are “half-savage relics of past times” who as Robin says try to “make medievalism modern.” And the liberals are not altogether mistaken here. But what we make of this hostility to modernity—what it *means* to make medievalism modern—turns crucially on whether we assume the subtraction account or the mutation counter-narrative. For what the former casts as a struggle between reason and parochial tradition, or between tolerance and prejudice, is for the latter a conflict between different forms of human agency, a conflict about what Elias calls the “overall human make-up.” It is a matter, not of differential enlightenment, but of differential civilization.

This kind of differentiation is what explains how the Right should have become the Left in order to accuse the Left of having become the Right, why conservatives are so tempted to assume the mantle of the underdog and can in good conscience appropriate the lingo, tropes, and analytical frameworks of the Left for their own causes. The reason is that, in presupposing a more thoroughgoing internalization of modernity’s secularized asceticism, liberalism also presupposes a more thoroughgoing *repression* of

⁴ Ibid. pg. 460.

our “default” impulses as porous selves. And the Right becomes the Left once this repression assumes a political dimension. Given that the ideals that liberals can espouse *as a result* of the repression are contravened in *the process* of repression, the fact of this repression must ambiguate the usual lines that liberals would draw between freedom and oppression, equality and inequality, and victim and perpetrator. This ambiguation is what conservative claims of cultural oppression endeavor to articulate.

Resentment against the secularized asceticism of the modern order is the concealed wellspring of conservative passions, the fuel which sustains the near-endless creativity with which conservatives strive to turn liberalism on its head. It is this which animates their sense of righteous resistance before a false consciousness-breeding liberal hegemon, providing the recurring webs of resonance by means of which analytically heterogeneous issues can come to feel somehow connected on a deeper level, as various battlefields on which ordinary Americans resist the encroachments of the liberal elites—who have become symbolic embodiments of the buffered identity. This resentment is also what drives conservatives’ powerful sense of their own authenticity, of their special insight into liberalism’s surreptitious parochialism, and the accompanying conviction that the rationality of liberals is too glib and shallow to grasp the deeper layers of meaning to which they are attuned. If there is an “indoctrination gap” between liberal elites and ordinary Americans, some difference that is not wholly reducible to one of learning and logic, this involves the extent to which they have internalized the secularized asceticism of the buffered identity. For this internalization is what the seemingly amorphous “elitism” of liberals ultimately consists in.

The disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity are never taken up as the explicit target of political grievance, of course. But they lie in the background, casting a shadow on everything else as the hidden premise that lends a new significance to arguments that might otherwise seem unintelligible. Conservatives are most attuned, not to liberal intentions, but to the affective-instinctual structure that provide those intentions with their resonance. If conservatives refuse to accept liberalism at face value, this is because they viscerally sense that liberalism originates in this structure, in what Elias calls “the retrained instinctual and affective impulses denied direct access to the motor apparatus.” And this is why they see symmetry where liberals see only asymmetry and believe that liberals exempt themselves from the standards to which they would hold others. For liberals give free reign to their own affective-instinctual structure, and therefore the hero-systems which it supports, while stigmatizing that of conservatives as barbaric and backwards. Hence conservatives’ sense that they are victims of a conservaphobia that is on some fundamental level akin to racism, sexism, or homophobia. They see politics as a contest, not only of ideas, but also of the overall human make-up. And what they experience

as liberal domination refers to a situation in which one such make-up is assuming preeminence over another, in which the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity has become the only “normal” or “healthy” way to be.

The mutation counter-narrative is therefore the key to transcending what I earlier described as implausibly “fundamentalist” interpretations of conservative claims of cultural oppression. For it is what permits us to disintricate the underlying impulses that animate these claims from the rhetorical shapes they assume—just as it allows us to disintricate the impulses that drive the liberal reaction to these claims from the rhetorical shapes which *they* assume. The mutation counter-narrative permits us to translate the claimants’ visceral sense of oppression—as well as liberals’ equally visceral incredulity before that sense of oppression—into a set of bona fide philosophical questions addressing whether the ideals of liberalism lend themselves to a conservative interpretation. It is to this task that we now turn.

1. Crypto-Aristocracy Revisited

My thesis may seem counterintuitive. After all, it is a commonplace that it is conservatives who, in their calls for sexual self-restraint, the work ethic, and deferred gratification, are the ones most drawn toward the disciplinary asceticism that I have here associated with liberalism. Hofstadter writes that “insofar as economic life is regarded as a sphere for the fulfillment of the ascetic Protestant virtues, Christian moralism has worked for right-wing discontent.”⁵ By contrast, I am proposing that this kind of asceticism is the *target* of right-wing discontent. But this may strike many as most implausible. After all, is it not conservatives rather than liberals who condemn mass-bohemianization, defending the “strict” or “austere” morality of the common people against the “loose” system of the “people of fashion”? Conservatives understand themselves as the defenders of civilization against its discontents. But I am suggesting that conservatives *are* civilization’s discontents. And this disjunction between my thesis and the received wisdom requires an explanation.

Peter Stearns argues in his *Battleground of Desire* that liberals and conservatives both oversimplify the contrast between Victorian order and contemporary freedom (or license, according to one’s perspective). Having overthrown the strictures of Victorian “character,” we feel ourselves liberated to express post-Victorian “personality.” But Stearns believes that twentieth-century personality is best understood as an overlay on, rather than a replacement for, nineteenth-century character. While today’s social world would seem informal in comparison with nineteenth-century rigidities, this merely reflects a

⁵ 81

“movement away from supportive structures toward more reliance on individual impulse control,” and not any wholesale abandonment of Victorian ideals. We may be more relaxed when it comes to language and posture. But this is because casualness now carries its own constraints. Swearing, for example, is now more permissible than before. But this liberalization presupposes a socially enforced diminution in emotional intensity. It is now understood that the swearer wasn’t too serious and that his utterances are therefore nothing to get too worked up over. By contrast, nineteenth-century politicians could be much more unrestrained and effusive in their emotional outbursts than are their contemporary counterparts. Thus, we cannot simply say that today’s constraints are categorically less burdensome than in the heyday of Victorianism, for these involve “a distinctive set of tolerances and restrictions” that in some ways demand greater vigilance than was once necessary.⁶

The received wisdom being challenged by Stearns is a symptom of the subtraction account, which overlooks the disciplinary scaffolding of modern subjectivity chronicled by the mutation counter-narrative. Liberals may demand moral relaxation—a shift in the “accent of reality” from “the objective order of institutions to the realm of subjectivity” as Berger says. But as we saw, this was only possible because the “firmness” that formerly attached to the order of institutions and traditions was transplanted into the affective-instinctual life of the individual. This is what Stearns’s study confirms. In disregarding the mutation counter-narrative, the received wisdom cannot recognize that liberalization, and therefore liberalism, presupposes an overall heightening of self-discipline, since it is this discipline that first created the individual who now exercises his vaunted freedom.

As we already observed in Chapter 4, what may superficially seem like the “looseness” of liberal morality is in fact underpinned by the disciplinary renunciation of anthropocentricity. It is conservatives, not liberals, who are by contrast guilty of “teleological libertinism.” And as we saw in Chapter 5, these disciplinary tendencies are a function of the building of renunciation into everyday life, the secularized asceticism that Religious Reform transplanted from the monastery into ordinary human affairs. This is the historical context in which the ostensible “looseness” of liberal morality must be understood, the reason why the usual contraposition of Victorian self-control and modern spontaneity radically oversimplifies. As Elias observes, the relaxation of many traditional taboos in the twentieth century, as in modern bathing and dancing practices, “is only possible because the level of habitually, technically, and institutionally consolidated self-control, the individual capacity to restrain one’s urges and behavior...has

⁶ Peter N. Stearns, *Battleground of Desire: The Struggle for Self-Control in Modern America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pgs. 4, 22, 39, 57, 174, 176, 358

been on the whole secured.” This liberalization is not a bald regression into medieval license and wantonness but “a relaxation within the framework of an already established standard.”⁷

* * *

This explains why conservatives can in almost the same breath accuse liberals of *both* corrosive moral relativism and insufferable moral puritanism without sensing any contradiction. Gertrude Himmelfarb charges that the “New Victorians” of the politically correct Left have abandoned the traditional sexual morality bequeathed to us by the old Victorians while promoting “a new moral code that is more intrusive and repressive than the old because it is based not on familiar, accepted principles but on new and recondite ones, as if designed for another culture or tribe.”⁸ And as we observed in Chapter 2, Christopher Lasch complains that upper middle-class liberals have, in the name of a “hygienic conception of life” mounted “a crusade to sanitize American society: to create a ‘smoke-free environment,’ to censor everything from pornography to ‘hate speech,’ and at the same time, incongruously, to extend the range of personal choice in matters where most people feel the need of solid moral guidelines.” But congruity is relative to conceptual scheme. And the inconsistency condemned by Lasch and Himmelfarb is actually the consistent application of liberals’ particular position along the modern/pre-modern continuum. Liberals and conservatives clash because conservatives are either 1) pursuing forms of disciplinary internalization—e.g., “traditional morality”—that liberals must, given their more “advanced” position along that continuum, eschew as needless and odious, or else 2) resisting more “advanced” forms of internalization which can resonate for the more thoroughly buffered but may seem alien and menacing for the less so. Liberals as relativistic, skeptical, or adversarial vis-à-vis the disciplines that conservatives would internalize and moralistic—i.e., politically correct—vis-à-vis those which they would internalize and that conservatives would resist. “Political correctness” may strike conservatives as a recondite morality designed for another tribe. But this impression is precisely what could be expected to follow from the mutation counter-narrative, for this is how the unwashed “folk” have always looked upon the reforming impulses of modern elites. What Himmelfarb, Lasch, and many others judge to be personal hypocrisy, or at least intellectual confusion, dissolves in the context of the mutation counter-narrative, which conceptualizes political ideology in terms the overall human make-up rather than ideas alone.

⁷ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), pg. 115.

⁸ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pg. 261.

Taylor observes that one reason for the decline of faith in much of the modern West is that it has completed its historical function, which was to promote “the inculcation of a productive adaptive character structure” needed to function in a modern environment.⁹ Whereas measures like absolute temperance or total Sabbath observance may at one point have been necessary to curb the residues of medieval license and wantonness, the disciplinary function of Christianity will appear irksome and gratuitous to those in whom that internalization is more complete, who are therefore in a position to relax traditional discipline in some spheres of life.¹⁰ Understood in this context, conservative claimants of cultural oppression are or seek to represent individuals for whom the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity have not yet become second nature and so may benefit from the admonitions of “traditional morality”—which is not really all that traditional, as we saw in the last chapter. By contrast, the upper middle-class liberals for whom this identity has become second nature have no use for this morality. This is why they adopt the positions they do, and why conservatives detect a hidden parochialism in the liberal culture. Liberals may eschew all inherited theologies, but they are also the vanguard of the discipline which theology first inculcated. They may not believe in God, but they are the products of a historical process through which the idea of God was used to tame the merely “animal” in human nature, a process of which the modern order is the outcome. As quintessential moderns, liberals are what Nietzsche calls “heirs of the conscience-vivisection and self-torture of millennia”¹¹ without which the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity could never have developed. The liberal elites do not themselves *need* religion, not because they are “enlightened,” but because religion has, in *their* case, already done most of its work, “thorough[ly] molding and interpenetrat[ing] the secular world,” as Hegel says, mutating from a set of beliefs, principles, and formal practices into an entire mode of consciousness and social ethos that is now taken for granted as “natural.”

As we saw in Chapter 3, Himmelfarb believes that liberals are today’s “people of fashion,” heirs to the “loose” system of morality that has always been the privilege of the aristocracy, and which has always stood opposed to the strict or austere system embraced by the “common people,” who can ill-afford the loose system. This is, we observed, what makes liberals “crypto-aristocrats.” But the mutation counter-narrative tells us that while the aristocracy may have been morally loose sexually, it was also that segment of European society which spearheaded the peculiarly courtly rationality and its affective-institual restraints. And it was this rationality which, once fused with the work of Religious Reform,

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 452.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pgs. 492-93.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pg. 95 (Essay 2, Sec. 24).

helped propagate the austere system of values within the population at large. The peculiarly courtly rationality was the preeminent fashion of the people of fashion, and it was precisely this fashion that engendered the “basic stock of models” that then served to more strictly regulate behavior and attitude within the wider populace. *This* is the actual root of liberal privilege cited by Himmelfarb. The “people of fashion” can afford the “loose” system of morality, not just because they are shielded from its consequences, but because, being at the forefront of the civilizing process, their overall make-up is such as to permit what Elias calls a “relaxation within the framework of an already established standard.”

This possibility is what allows the liberal elites to dismiss the austere system as backwardness and superstition and indulge in a moral relativism and subjectivism that others lacking in that already established standard cannot permit themselves. Himmelfarb remarks that the notion, common among the disciples of Nietzsche and Foucault, that the self-induced morality of the internalized conscience is the most coercive and tyrannical, “would have been incomprehensible to virtually all Victorians.”¹² If what is obvious to the former would have been incomprehensible to the latter, this is because the former have already internalized what the latter were still in the process of internalizing. “Free-spirited” liberals can *afford* to be free-spirited because they are the beneficiaries and heirs of an extended historical process in which Victorianism played an important role.

Yet the ideology of the subtraction account conceals this privilege from liberals. Observing that many strongly Republican states have higher rates of divorce, teenage promiscuity, and out-of-wedlock birth than many strongly Democratic ones, Alan Wolfe remarks that “Americans in the red states might consider that politics, even conservative politics, cannot help them if their marriages are unhappy, their children rebellious, and their willpower weak.”¹³ Naturally, liberals pounce upon these discrepancies as evidence of the usual conservative hypocrisy. But this impression is a function of the subtraction account and its focus on belief. Conceptualizing human motivation on this level, liberals see an inconsistency between professed conviction and actual conduct. But the contradiction is dissolved by the mutation of counter-narrative, at the level of the overall human make-up. Seen in this context, “traditional family values” will naturally be more celebrated where they are more *needed*, where religion has not yet achieved its transformative ends. If some conservatives’ willpower is indeed weak, this is because they have yet to internalize the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, which is what they seek to

¹² Himmelfarb, *De-Moralization of Society*, pg. 51.

¹³ James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, *Is There A Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*, eds. E.J. Dionne Jr. and Michael Cromartie (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), pgs. 58.

achieve through traditional values. And so what liberals cast as a contradiction between professed principle and actual conduct is simply an attempt to realize an ideal that cannot yet be taken for granted.

If liberals can accuse conservatives of hypocritically failing to live by the “traditional family values” which they officially espouse, then conservatives can with equal justice accuse liberals of the hypocrisy of *actually living by values* which they officially dismiss as the mean-spirited rhetoric of benighted moralists. Noting that the upper-middle-class liberals who are most likely to condemn the stigmatization of out-of-wedlock pregnancy as traditionalistic prejudice are also “the least likely to behave as if that original prejudice were unjustified,” Theodore Dalrymple concludes that “for that class the matter is principally one of intellectual preening and point-scoring, of appearing bold, generous, imaginative, and independent-minded in the eyes of their peers, rather than a matter of practical policy.”¹⁴ The liberal will retort that there is no contradiction of principle, and therefore no hypocrisy, because his adoption of a monogamous hard-working lifestyle is merely a personal choice whose validity he has never impugned. He criticizes conservatives, not for their own personal choices but for their intolerance before the personal choices of others. However, the upshot of the mutation counter-narrative is that the monogamous, hard-working lifestyle is *not*, strictly speaking, an individual choice, but rather the historical legacy of the civilizing process. Far from being voluntary, it is something that, as Elias would say, is “instilled in the individual from his earliest years as an automatism, a self-compulsion that he cannot resist even if he consciously wishes to.” The “choice” celebrated by liberals arises *in the context* of a “relaxation within the framework of an already established standard.” But that standard has not itself been chosen, which is why liberals must strike conservatives as hypocritical in urging a choice rather than urging morality.

On the other hand, Dalrymple’s critique is not entirely fair. Just like conservative hypocrisy, liberal hypocrisy is dissolved by the mutation counter-narrative. While Charles Murray and other conservatives have criticized upper middle-class liberals for refusing to “preach what they practice” to the lower classes, it is crucial to these liberals’ understanding of what they are practicing that it *not* be preached. For what is being practiced isn’t simply certain rules of behavior, but those rules as understood at a certain stage in the development of the buffered identity, a stage where those rules have become second-nature and almost invisible as rules. If liberals have little patience for what social conservatives describe as most people’s “need for solid moral guidelines,” this is because this advanced stage in the civilizing process disposes them toward the subtraction account, which tells them that moral discipline can be imposed by rationality alone. This rationality having been understood as an underlying feature of human nature

¹⁴ Theodore Dalrymple, *In Praise of Prejudice: The Necessity of Preconceived Ideas* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), pg. 25.

rather than the expression of a hero-system, what is needed isn't moral guidelines, but such enlightenment as may be found in education, therapy, or rehabilitation—which all seek to recover something that is assumed to be already there.

* * *

As we saw, it was with the rise of a peculiarly courtly rationality that “the demand for ‘good behavior’ is raised more emphatically,” and that “[a]ll problems concerned with behavior take on new importance.” This demand for good behavior is at the origin of “political correctness,” which projects the norms of courtly etiquette onto the political stage, extending its demand not to offend to an ever-wider array of contexts, promoting forms of discourse attuned to an ever-wider range of sensibilities and sensitivities. Those so privileged as to enjoy what Elias calls a “relaxation within the framework of an already established standard” have the leeway to establish *new* standards. And this is what liberals do when they promote “understanding,” “equal respect,” “tolerance,” and associated ideals.

Himmelfarb complains that whereas the old Victorians embraced a set of clear, consistent, and commonsensical moral prohibitions, the “New Victorians” of the Left have adopted a convoluted and often contradictory moral code, a “curious combination of promiscuity and prudery” as she calls it. The New Victorians do not denounce drunkenness but only “those who take ‘advantage’ of their partners’ drunkenness.” In doing so, they also trivialize rape by “associating it with ‘date rape,’ defined so loosely as to include consensual intercourse that is belatedly regretted by the woman.”¹⁵ And this has created a kind of moral repressiveness not seen before. Being straightforward and commonsensical, the old code could become “deeply embedded in tradition and convention” and so “largely internalized.”¹⁶ By contrast, the morality of the New Victorians is “novel and contrived, officially legislated and coercively enforced.”¹⁷ Though the old Victorians have an undeserved reputation as meddlesome moralists and officious busybodies, they would in truth “have been as distressed by the overtness and formality of college regulations governing sexual conduct (with explicit consent required at every stage of the sexual relation) as by the kind of conduct—promiscuity, they would have called it—implicitly sanctioned by those regulations.”¹⁸

But what Himmelfarb decries as the unintelligibly convoluted character of the New Victorian morality is a direct reflection of liberals’ more thoroughgoing internalization of the buffered identity. With

¹⁵ Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society*, pg. 261.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 260.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 260.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 260.

a high “level of habitually, technically, and institutionally consolidated self-control,” being a given, and so with the buffered identity’s function as a mechanism for organismic self-governance having been securely established, the dangers of drunkenness and promiscuity *per se* can recede into the background. And so the concern can now shift to the individual’s inner depth, as the innerness of the buffered identity becomes experienced more as a *fount of self-expression* and less as a *center of self-control*, as it was for the Victorians. Victorian character having evolved into modern personality, the nature of interpersonal morality must evolve accordingly. This is not a “curious combination of promiscuity and prudery,” but one more manifestation of the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, of which Victorian prudery was an earlier variant.

This logic is illustrated in feminist Lois Pineau’s proposal that rape law be reformed to presume that a woman has consented to intercourse only when she was presented with “communicative sexuality” according to which “mutual sexual enjoyment requires an atmosphere of comfort and communication, a minimum of pressure, and an ongoing check-up on one’s partner’s state.”¹⁹ This being what any woman would naturally want, sex that fails to conform to this model is presumptively non-consensual. Pineau believes that this standard makes sense because good sex—sex which a woman may reasonably be presumed to have desired—aspires to the same ideals as good conversation. What does this mean? Pineau explains:

Good conversationalists are intuitive, sympathetic, and charitable. They do not overwhelm their respondents with a barrage of their own opinions. While they may be persuasive, the forcefulness of their persuasion does not lie in their being overbearing, but rather in their capacity to see others’ point of view, to understand what it depends on, and so to address the essential point, but with tact and clarity.²⁰

This is the ideal to which good sex aspires and precisely what Himmelfarb’s prudery/promiscuity dichotomy fails to capture. As Elias observes, the conversational style of the courts provided “the basic stock of models” that would eventually be disseminated within the wider society, where it would inform expectations about proper behavior and attitudes in a wide range of spheres. And Pineau’s proposal is merely among the latest and most ambitious of such extensions, one which applies the peculiarly courtly rationality, not only to the restraint of sexuality, but to sexuality itself. Courtly etiquette required a language that is “clear, transparent, precisely regulated,” and Pineau is simply transplanting this ideal to the sexual realm as the measure of genuine consent. It is not an arbitrary, convoluted morality, but rather the standard to which any properly “civilized” sexuality must conform.

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 498.

²⁰ Lois A. Pineau, *Date Rape: A Feminist Analysis*, in *MORALITY AND MORAL CONTROVERSIES*, ed. John Arthur (1989), pg. 499.

The buffered self is the self that is defined ontologically by the possibility of disengagement and, normatively, by the *demand* for disengagement, by the imperative to “take a distance” from “everything outside the mind” and thereby establish an “inner base area” through which how things are can be distinguished from how they feel. And it is this civilizational imperative that drives the seemingly convoluted morality of the New Victorians. For the purpose of communicative sexuality is to advance that imperative and thereby ensure the self-possession that is required to distinguish authentic, inwardly generated desire from externally induced “pressure.” The requirement that consent be somehow re-elicited and re-issued at every stage of the sexual encounter is intended to promote the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, without which a woman’s true feelings cannot be distinguished from whatever fleeing, merely animal impulses her seducer may have succeeded in stimulating. The sense that “consensual intercourse that is belatedly regretted by the woman” can constitute rape reflects the retrospective insight that the seducer was either insufficiently committed to promoting or actively committed to suppressing this inner base area, and therefore bears responsibility for the consequences.

Feminists see themselves as concerned, not with instilling a peculiarly courtly rationality, but with preventing and punishing sexual coercion, of course. But what *qualifies as coercion* depends on how we understand human agency, and how feminists conceptualize coercion presupposes a conception of agency that allows for clear lines to be drawn between the autonomous and the heteronomous, between an inner base area and the external forces that would compromise it. Only once external meaning is conceptualized as an invasive force that compromises our agency—rather than a necessary feature of that agency, as it was for porous pre-moderns—can communicative sexuality seem obviously more reasonable than a sexuality that is more tacit, animal-like, and impulsive. What a more porous self would experience as the morally neutral fact that human organisms “impress themselves” upon one another on a visceral, pre-reflective level, the buffered identity may experience as the seeds of “domination,” the submersion of consciousness in mere flesh. The acceptable threshold of tolerance for the merely animal having become much lessened, the merely animal is now identified, not only with unambiguous physical overpowering—how conservatives define rape—but with the slightest intimations thereof in raw, un-intellectualized animal desire, with anything that, in neglecting an “on-going check-up on one’s partner’s state,” fails to uphold the peculiarly courtly rationality. Hence Pineau’s understanding of sexual teasing. It is not a power-play that first stimulates and then frustrates animal lust but rather a practice that is

“playful and inspires wit,”²¹ and this is because teasing has been interpreted according to a peculiarly courtly rationality.

This rationality is also at play in Anita Bernstein’s proposal that sexual harassment law be reformed to center around respect rather than reasonableness of conduct.²² Bernstein argues that “unreasonableness” fails to capture the harm which is at the heart of sexual harassment, indignity, and invokes a social consensus that is often just a male consensus.²³ By contrast, respect is “a commonsensical norm that lay persons understand and apply.”²⁴ Respect is simply the “recognition of a person’s inherent worth.”²⁵ And respectful persons are simply persons who do not “engage in conduct that rejects or denies the personhood or self-conception of another.”²⁶ But then the *meaning* of respect turns on what it means to deny the personhood and self-conception of another. And this is not obvious. For what some would condemn as “disrespect” is only an exaggeration of attitudes that play a role in any normal human relationship. Challenging and modifying one another’s self-conception is in some ways an ineluctable aspect of ordinary human interaction. Standing alone, the concept of respect is powerless to establish any neat lines of interpersonal propriety.

If the meaning of “respect” can *seem* commonsensical and obvious, as it does to Bernstein, this is only by virtue of taken-for-granted assumptions about the meaning of personhood. And as with Pineau’s proposal, these assumptions are expressions of the buffered identity, for which personhood means disengaged self-possession. That is why Bernstein can endorse the English philosopher Richard Norman’s characterization of respect as an attitude of separateness, as “a reaction of distancing oneself,”²⁷ because to distance oneself is to acknowledge the other’s right to disengaged self-possession, to reassure that one has no intention of interfering with it. But not everyone places this right at the center of their identity, which is why some feminist proposals are more controversial than feminists believe they should be, why some view feminism as a symptom of sexual “hang-ups.” What some women will dismiss as harmless sexual innuendo acknowledging the simple fact of animal attraction may be experienced by feminists as a denial of their personhood, a degrading fall from the lofty heights of that personhood into merely animal passions. And the reason is that feminists have more thoroughly internalized the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. With the threshold of tolerance for the merely animal having been

²¹ Ibid. pg. 499.

²² Anita Bernstein, *Treating Sexual Harassment with Respect*, 111 Harv. L. Rev. 445, 452 (1997).

²³ Ibid., pg. 452-76.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 521.

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 452.

²⁶ Ibid., pg. 487.

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 512.

lowered, the self has now been defined in opposition to merely animal passions. It is the subject that is never to be made an object, not the “agent/thing” of pre-moderns but an agent *simpliciter*. Notwithstanding feminist talk of “objectification,” the sexual harasser does not treat women as things but as agent/things—or, more precisely, as *more* of an agent/thing than is compatible with feminists’ particular identities, with their particular position along the civilizing process. This is their actual offense.

Catherine MacKinnon claims to defend a “feminism unmodified.” But her feminism has in fact been modified by the buffered distance and its ideals of self-possessed interiority and invulnerability, modified by what Taylor calls “one historically constructed understanding of agency among others.” Whereas Himmelfarb would dismiss feminist morality as historically unprecedented and recondite, Camille Paglia writes that feminism “doesn’t realize the degree to which it’s been co-opted by a certain kind of Puritan *whiteness*,”²⁸ which she believes is exemplified in the “dour background of Protestant high seriousness” of a Catherine MacKinnon.²⁹ There is nothing theologically Protestant in the views of MacKinnon, of course. But the truth of Paglia’s observation resides in its allusion to the buffered identity, which Protestant high seriousness with its emphasis on the inner assent of conscience had an important hand in shaping. And this is something that feminists seek to impose alongside their feminism. The New Victorianism is not a wholly novel and arbitrary contrivance, as Himmelfarb casts it, but rather the latest extension of the historical processes that gave birth to the modern world—including the old Victorianism—one more raising of what Elias calls the “invisible wall of affects which seems now to rise between one human body and another, repelling and separating.” The sexual conduct codes condemned by conservatives are merely etiquette manuals for safely navigating around that wall. And therein lies the hidden parochialism that feminism’s enemies believe they detect in it. While feminists may pretend that their concern is solely with power and not morality, this disavowal is just so much deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry, because the morality has been built into the very identities being safeguarded against coercion, harassment, and the like.

Brian Wilson wonders why conservatives who are vocally opposed to college codes intended to ensure that sex is genuinely consensual refuse to also criticize the more severe brands of “sexual correctness” instituted by some religious colleges—including categorical prohibitions on divorce, homosexuality, immodest dress, pre-marital or extra-marital sex, and overnight dorm visits.³⁰ But just like any number of other hypocrisies, the hypocrisy of criticizing lesser restrictions on sexual freedom while

²⁸ Camille Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pg. 290.

²⁹ Ibid, pg. 109.

³⁰ John K. Wilson, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education* (Duke University Press, 1995), pg. 119-20.

tolerating greater ones dissolves within the mutation counter-narrative. The bone of contention between conservatives and liberals is never the abstract one of whether there is to be more or less freedom, but rather the concrete identity that is being implicitly promoted through arguments about freedom. This is why conservatives adopt the positions they do. What Himmelfarb condemns as a “curious combination of promiscuity and prudery” *makes sense* in the context of a more thorough internalization of the buffered identity and its courtly-ascetic ethos. And it is because conservatives are averse to that ethos that that they must see this combination as indeed curious. In registering their bemusement, they are implicitly repudiating the form of agency that would dissolve this bemusement, dissenting from liberalism’s attempt to naturalize the buffered identity as essential human nature—for this naturalization is at the root of their cultural oppression. Though cultural war conflict is formally adjudicated in the language of high moral abstractions, like freedom and equality, it is the structure of agency, the “overall make-up” of human beings that is most fundamental, the true subject of political power. Feminism, after all, is simply one arm of a transformative liberalism. The foreground of that liberalism is constituted by culturally denuded abstractions like autonomy and equal respect, which none would baldly reject. But its silent background is the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, which are being surreptitiously inculcated *through* demands for autonomy and equal respect. And this is why conservatives refuse to accept those demands at face value.

2. Cosmological Orientation

The above are merely a few preliminary illustrations of my thesis, and what they foremost serve to illustrate is that liberals and conservatives alike *over-intellectualize* the nature of their conflicts—which must therefore be *de-intellectualized* in order to be properly understood. Liberals and conservatives both operate with what Taylor calls the *epistemological construal* of human agency, the notion that we are in the first instance *knowers*, and that we are to make sense of ourselves and each other in terms of our relationship to this capacity. But the epistemological construal is hardly “neutral.” Being rooted in the subtraction account and the ideal of strategic agency, it naturally favors the liberal cause and has been internalized by conservatives to their detriment and against their deepest instincts. For there is an alternative construal that follows from the mutation counter-narrative and what it reveals to be the human condition. Taylor writes:

The tremendous contribution of Heidegger, like that of Kant, consists in having focused the issue properly. Once this is done, we can’t deny the picture that emerges. Even in our theoretical stance to the world, we are agents. Even to find out about the world and formulate disinterested pictures, we have to come to grips with it, experiment, set ourselves to observe, control conditions.

But in all this, which forms the indispensable basis of theory, we are engaged as agents coping with things. It is clear that we couldn't form disinterested representations any other way.

But once we take this point, then the entire epistemological position is undermined. Obviously, foundationalism goes, since our representations of things—the kinds of objects we pick out as whole, enduring entities—are grounded in the way we deal with things. These dealings are largely inarticulate, and the project of articulating them fully is an essentially incoherent one, just because any articulative project would itself rely on a background or horizon of nonexplicit engagement with the world.

But the argument here cuts deeper. Foundationalism is undermined because you can't go on digging under our ordinary representations to uncover further, more basic representations. What you get underlying our representations of the world—the kinds of things we formulate, for instance, in declarative sentences—is not further representations but rather a certain grasp of the world that we have as agents in it. This shows the whole epistemological construal of knowledge to be mistaken. It doesn't just consist of inner pictures of outer reality, but grounds in something quite other.³¹

This “something quite other” is the way in which we are oriented toward the world before representational claims are made. And what I've described as the modern/pre-modern continuum refers to a range of ways in which one can be so oriented. This is why the culture wars must be understood as a conflict, not of ideas, but of what I will here term *cosmological orientations*. If being conservative is, as James Kirchick suggested, very much like being gay, this is because both consist in an orientation rather than a belief. Gays are not attracted to the same sex because they *believe* that such attraction embodies the most accurate representation of reality, but because they are *oriented* toward sexuality in a particular way. And likewise, both liberalism and conservatism can be understood at a level that precedes reflective deliberation. They are not just opposed sets of “disinterested representations” but also competing forms of “nonexplicit engagement with the world,” different ways of being, as Barrett says, “already out-of-doors” in a world of concern. The culture wars are ultimately a clash of cosmological orientation, and it is on this level that conservative claims of cultural oppression are most profoundly understood.

Cosmological orientation is never itself the explicit subject of political, social, or cultural disagreement but rather what lends shape to it. It is what Taylor calls a “largely unstructured and unarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have.”³² It is not a theory but a background “whose shape is not perceived, but which conditions, largely unnoticed, the way we think, infer, experience, process claims and arguments.”³³ The epistemological framework calls on us to adjudicate between liberalism and conservatism on the level of ideas, in terms of a disagreement about what “makes sense.” But *qua* cosmological orientations,

³¹ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard University Press, 1995), pgs. 11-12.

³² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 173.

³³ *Ibid.* pg. 565.

liberalism and conservatism are competing background understandings whose shapes are not perceived by liberals and conservatives themselves. Cosmological orientation is our basic sense of what it is to be a human agent acting in a world, the horizon of meaning against whose backdrop we reflect upon our ends. It is, as Heidegger says, the way human beings can be “delivered over” to themselves³⁴, something that exists “*prior* to all cognition and volition, and *beyond* their range of disclosure.”³⁵ Cosmological orientation is not ordinarily disclosed because it is our *way* of disclosing the world, structuring the way in which things first impress themselves upon us *before* we will them or think them. It is the invisible scaffolding of the self. And this is precisely why cultural warfare is indeed warfare, why these disagreements can become so virulent, because they concern, not merely what the world is like, but what *we* are like.

The epistemological construal of agency is the corollary of the subtraction account just as cosmological orientation is the corollary of the mutation counter-narrative. Whereas the subtraction account conceptualizes the development of modernity and secularity in terms of changes in our ideas, the mutation counter-narrative conceptualizes that development in terms of changes in the overall human make-up, which is precisely what the concept of cosmological orientation as nonexplicit engagement with the world is intended to capture. Thus, the subtraction account charts the movement from orthodox Christianity to Providential Deism to skepticism through changes in our “disinterested representations.” The movement from the first to the second to the last is simply a sequential subtraction of unwarranted beliefs, the subtraction of a sacralized conception of divinity for a progressively de-sacralized one followed by the subtraction of the latter in favor of atheism or agnosticism. These developments are merely stages in the forward march of knowledge. By contrast, the mutation counter-narrative charts the same developments as the unfolding of a cosmological orientation, the disengaged self-possession of the buffered self, which grew out of religion before assuming a life of its own and turning against religion. This legacy is the reason why religious conservatives do not accept liberals’ professed commitment to religious neutrality at face value, and instead dismiss liberal neutrality as the stealth and subterfuge of a sectarian disposition. The sectarian disposition in question is the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, and it can go unnoticed precisely because it inheres in liberals’ cosmological orientation rather than in any expressly avowed tenets.

Gillespie writes “The modern world certainly arises out of the Reformation and has a strongly Protestant character even when it seems most secular. Insofar as Protestantism always defined itself in

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), pg. 174.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 175.

terms of the *deus absconditus*, secularism can be understood as merely one of its extreme forms.”³⁶ Though the religious neutrality of secularists does not presuppose any Protestant beliefs, it does presuppose the cosmological orientation expressed in those beliefs, the cosmological orientation that would permit one to recognize God as *deus absconditus*, the God of religious Reform. For what secularists uphold as religious neutrality can qualify as such only if God is first conceived as a God of unqualified transcendence, as an absent God who does not deign to directly embed his divinity in space and time, leaving room for a “natural world” in which he does not directly participate. Only in that case can he be safely ignored at public institutions and functions without insult. And so only in that case can such disregard qualify as religiously neutral. Liberalism does not formally endorse this conception of God to the exclusion of some other conception. But it does presuppose a form of consciousness that developed through this conception. Far from being what naturally emerges upon having “lost, or sloughed off, or liberated [ourselves] from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge,” the religious neutrality of secularists is just a further step toward the de-sacralization of religion initiated by Religious Reform, an intellectualized and sublimated reconstitution of Protestant hostility to idolatry and embodied feelings of the higher. I will develop this argument in detail in Chapter 9. But the essential point is that cosmological orientation and the mutation counter-narrative endow conservative claims of cultural oppression with an intelligibility they would otherwise lack.

The abortion controversy can be similarly explained. The secular liberal may imagine that, whatever reasonable arguments might be mounted against legal abortion in the third trimester of a pregnancy, these are surely inapplicable to stem cells or to a newly conceived fetus, which plainly lack the neurological substratum to support consciousness, and therefore personhood and rights. And so these situations seem to relieve us of whatever difficult ethical quandaries might arise at later stages of a pregnancy. But this reasoning assumes the cosmological orientation of the buffered self, for which to say that the fetus is *potential* life is to make a claim about efficient causation, a claim to the effect that the fetus will, given the laws of biology, achieve infancy if various causal preconditions are satisfied. But as relative pre-moderns, conservatives inhabit a world of final causes. Potentiality here refers, not to a fact *about* how the fetus is likely to interact with the rest of the world but a fact *in* the fetus itself. The fetus is a “charged object” as it were—if not a full-fledged agent, then at least an “agent/thing.” As we saw in the last chapter, the science of the early modern period aimed to purge nature of its “animist accretions,” and this is precisely what pro-lifers will not do.

³⁶ Michael Allen Gillsespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (The University of Chicago Press 2008), pg. 227.

How one conceives of the fetus's potentiality is a function of the extent to which one has internalized the buffered identity with its mind-body dualism and de-sacralization of matter. Those who experience that dualism more profoundly in themselves will also be more disposed to ask whether a fetus's physiological development at any given juncture is adequate to sustain the consciousness which is the predicate of moral personhood. By contrast, those who experience that dualism less deeply, whose sensibilities are more pre-modern, will be more disposed to believe that a fetus has personhood by virtue of the teleology that inheres in it from the beginning—a personhood which its growing resemblance to an infant reveals but does not create. Being moderns, liberals dichotomize more strongly between agents and things. And so recognizing that fetuses are highly lacking in agency, they conclude that it must be a thing and nothing but a thing. But being less bound by this dichotomy, conservatives can see personhood in a fetus even when it lacks any of the characteristic powers of the strategic agent.

To be sure, conservative claimants of cultural oppression state their claims in the language of belief—e.g., family values, respect for life, etc. But this scarcely explains *why* they hold the beliefs which they hold, and so scarcely explains why these issues have proven recalcitrant to adjudication. The explanation, I am arguing, resides in cosmological orientation. The culture wars have proven intractable, *not* because they implicate “deeply held beliefs,” as is often said, but because they implicate something even *deeper* than deeply held belief, cosmological orientation. Berger writes that the counterculture of the 1960s was “rooted in pre-theoretical consciousness—that is, in consciousness prior to any particular theoretical legitimations.”³⁷ The same can be said of both the counter-counter culture of conservative claims of cultural oppression and the dominant liberalism they oppose. And am here attempting to actually *theorize those pre-theoretical consciousnesses*, to put into words what we usually just feel in order to rationally articulate the pre-rational features of our political discourses. John Gray writes “People who belong to different ways of life need have no disagreement. They may simply be different.”³⁸ In this spirit, our project here is to translate what are presented as disagreements into human differences that cannot be captured by the language of agreement and disagreement, which is what the concept of cosmological orientation and the buffered/porous dichotomy will allow us to achieve.

But can we really say that liberals and conservatives “belong to different ways of life”? Nunberg writes that while one could plausibly describe the working and upper classes of Victorian England as discrete cultures, it takes “willful disregard to imagine that the cultural differences between upper-

³⁷ Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pg. 34.

³⁸ John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: New Press, 2000), pg. 5.

middle-class Texans and New Englanders are more dramatic than the economic differences between the inhabitants of Beverly Hills and Watts.”³⁹ But how we quantify cultural differences depends on how we conceive of culture. As Kymlicka observes, if culture refers to the “civilization” of a people, then nearly all modern westerners share the same culture, which can be distinguished from the feudal, agricultural, and theocratic worlds of our ancestors. But if “culture” refers to various lifestyle enclaves, social movements, and voluntary associations, then modern societies can be said to contain a plethora of cultures.⁴⁰ And Nunberg’s argument seems to be that while conservatives speak of their cultural differences from liberals as though they were so vast as to be nearly civilizational, they are in fact no greater than between different lifestyle enclaves, and perhaps not even so extensive as these go. However, the concept of cosmological orientation offers us a third way of conceptualizing the cultural differences that conservatives allege and that liberals deny. Liberals and conservatives may accept the same basic civilizational structures and have many of the same personal habits and consumer preferences. But underneath these similarities is a meaningful if largely visceral and unconscious difference in the degree to which they have accepted and internalized the buffered identity. This difference cannot be readily quantified—as can the economic differences between Beverly Hills and Watts. But it is not for this reason unreal. As I have already begun to show, it can explain a great deal.

This model does not permit us to “track” people’s social and political views with perfect accuracy, of course. There are pro-life strict separationists, just as there are pro-choice non-strict separationists, and this fact is not explained by the model. But this is a limitation inherent to all studies of political psychology, which must posit ideal-types that are only imperfectly instantiated in flesh-and-blood individuals. The value of such studies is to be measured, not according to whether they realize what is an impossible aspiration, but by the extent to which they illuminate our intuitive sense that there is *some reason* for why certain sets of facially unrelated moral, social, and political opinions tend to cluster together in the general outlooks of certain sorts of people. As Sowell observes,

One of the curious things about political opinions is how often the same people line up on opposite sides of different issues. The issues themselves may have no intrinsic connection with each other. They may range from military spending to drug laws to monetary policy to education. Yet the same familiar faces can be found glaring at each other from opposite sides of the political fence, again and again. It happens too often to be coincidence and it is too uncontrolled to be a plot.⁴¹

³⁹ Geoffrey Nunberg, *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left Wing Freak Show* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), pg. 74-75.

⁴⁰ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pg. 18.

⁴¹ Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (Basic Books, 2002), pg. 3.

Often is not always. Just as there may be neurological reasons why some people are “biconceptual” as between Strict Father and Nurturant Parent moralities, so these may also explain why a given individual is “modern” in some contexts but “pre-modern” in others. Some people may be complex repositories of modern and pre-modern impulses, each of which is restricted to particular outlets. Whatever be the ultimate explanation, our purpose here is not to more accurately predict the preferences of particular actors but to more profoundly understand the *meaning* of those preferences. And my argument is that this meaning resides in a pre-theoretical layer of human experience, the degree to which we are more buffered or more porous. Standing alone, this difference has no obvious political content. But it is what is being articulated *through* the political content.

Cosmological orientation is what explains conservatives’ sense that they are divided from liberals by “indelible psychological differences,” their conviction that liberalism refers, not to any narrowly political credo, but to a social identity and overarching cultural ethos that informs a broad range of ostensibly apolitical mores. As relative pre-moderns who have not internalized the epistemological framework to the extent that have liberals, conservatives are more attuned to cosmological orientation, which is why they refuse to accept liberalism at face value as just a set of ideas or values. Cosmological orientation explains, not only why “the same familiar faces can be found glaring at each other from opposite sides of the political fence, again and again,” but also why conservatives should again and again experience that political fence as a source of cultural oppression. Their claims of cultural oppression all originate in their visceral sense that they are being *discriminated against on the basis of cosmological orientation*. This is what enables them to so effortlessly position themselves as victims. If conservatives have, as James Poulos complains, been judged “unfit for life off the reservation, unable and unwilling to function in any truly human environment,” this is because they have not internalized the “ordering impulses” of the buffered identity, which now define what it means to be properly civilized. As a coarse and squalid animalistic peasantry, they are outsiders denied entry to the courtly halls of liberalism with all its false airs and empty refinements. This sense of things is never actually expressed in these terms, of course. But this is because it is a component of cosmological orientation, something “whose shape is not perceived, but which conditions, largely unnoticed, the way we think, infer, experience, process claims and arguments.” Conservatives may articulate their sense of exclusion in a wide variety of ways. But the feeling originates in various degrees of alienation from the buffered identity, their predicament as relative pre-moderns confronting a social order that is hostile to their basic sense of themselves.

It must be emphasized that “pre-modern” is being employed in a technical philosophical sense, as a form of phenomenological description, and is not intended to imply any judgment on conservatives’

rationality or insight. To be sure, the term suggests a perspective that is “backwards” in some chronological sense. It does not follow, however, that conservative claims of cultural oppression are “backwards” in a philosophical sense. The pre-moderns of yesteryear may have been wrong about why objects fall toward the ground when dropped. But it does not follow that their contemporary scions are mistaken as regards what concerns us here, their claims of cultural oppression. They could be right about this even if they are mistaken about everything else.

It might be objected that whatever I intend these terms to mean, “pre-modern” just does carry generally negative connotations, whereas “modern” carries generally positive ones. As Saba Mahmood observes, modern/pre-modern and buffered/porous are hardly neutral descriptors. On the contrary, they serve to relegate “unruly subjects” like evangelicals and fundamentalists to the temporal past or the geospatial location of the “non-West.” They express “the operation of modern secular power through which certain religious subjectivities are authorized and others made the object of reform and subject to the ‘civility’ of secular norms and conventions.”⁴² These connotations cannot be denied. But be this as it may, our objective from the outset has been to construct a philosophically cogent *critical theory of the Right*, and my terminological preferences are fully in line with this aspiration. If the gay rights movement could appropriate the formerly pejorative “queer” for its own purposes, then the critical theory of the right can appropriate the sometimes pejorative “pre-modern” toward its ends. And I shall be presenting the issues in a manner that permits this appropriation.

3. Grasping Treason

As we saw in Chapter 2, David Gelernter condemns today’s PORGIs—post-religious globalist intellectuals—for having cut themselves off from their own national and religious traditions, for dismissing patriotism as “simply vulgar,” and for having, moreover, deprived their fellow Americans of the “unselfconscious patriotic pleasure” that once came with praising their nation. Conservatives suspect that liberals are less than fully patriotic, and perhaps less than fully American. And as we will now see, the truth of these allegations is a function of the cosmological orientation through which the meaning of patriotism is being processed. Here as elsewhere, the apparent intractability of political disagreement originates, not in deeply held beliefs, but in something deeper than deeply held belief, cosmological orientation.

⁴² Saba Mahmood, “Can Secularism be Other-wise?,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), pgs. 293-94.

There is perhaps no greater symbol of patriotism than the American flag, and a clash of cosmological orientation can be discovered in the different meanings it can carry for different people. These divergent meanings were articulated in *Texas v. Johnson*, where the Supreme Court held that a Texas statute criminalizing the desecration of the American flag violated the First Amendment. In doing so, the Supreme Court affirmed the judgment of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, which determined that since the state cannot dictate citizens' attitudes towards the flag and what it symbolizes, it cannot restrict the flag's use to the communication of approved attitudes.⁴³ The State of Texas had argued that "if one physically treats the flag in a way that would tend to cast doubt on either the idea that nationhood and national unity are the flag's referents or that national unity actually exists, the message conveyed thereby is a harmful one and therefore may be prohibited."⁴⁴ But as the Court saw it the "harm" in question was simply the changes in attitude toward the flag and America that flag-burning might induce. Texas maintained that it was attempting to protect something intrinsic to the flag itself, but it was actually attempting to control people's attitudes toward it.

To uphold the Texas law therefore would have been to announce that "the flag itself may be used as a symbol -- as a substitute for the written or spoken word or a 'short cut from mind to mind' -- only in one direction."⁴⁵ The Court would be "permitting a State to 'prescribe what shall be orthodox' by announcing that one may use the flag to convey one's attitude toward it and its referents only if one does not endanger the flag's representation of nationhood and national unity."⁴⁶ But nationhood and national unity clearly represent what is one viewpoint among others, precisely the viewpoint that was being contradicted by flag-burning: "Thus, if Texas means to argue that its interest does not prefer any viewpoint over another, it is mistaken; surely one's attitude toward the flag and its referents is a viewpoint."⁴⁷ Given that the "intent to convey a particularized message" was clearly present and given that those to whom it was directed would clearly understand it,⁴⁸ there could be no principled basis upon which to distinguish flag burning from other forms of protected symbolic speech.⁴⁹

Justices Rehnquist and Stevens both dissented, however, and argued that the majority had committed a fundamental category error in framing the issue as one of viewpoint discrimination. The Court took it as obvious that the flag was a vehicle for symbolic speech: "Pregnant with expressive content,

⁴³ *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397, 404 (U.S., 1989).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 413.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 417.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 417..

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 413, n. 9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 404 (quoting *Spence v. Washington*, 418 U.S. 405, 410-411 (U.S. 1974).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 417.

the flag as readily signifies this Nation as does the combination of letters found in 'America.'"⁵⁰ But Rehnquist disagreed and lamented that the "[t]he uniquely deep awe and respect for our flag felt by virtually all of us are bundled off [by the majority] under the rubric of 'designated symbols,' ...that the First Amendment prohibits the government from 'establishing.'"⁵¹ Given that Americans' attitudes toward their flag do not appear tied to any particular political or philosophical beliefs, the statute did not qualify as unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination:

The flag does not represent the views of any particular political party, and it does not represent any particular political philosophy. The flag is not simply another 'idea' or 'point of view' competing for recognition in the marketplace of ideas. Millions and millions of Americans regard it with an almost mystical reverence regardless of what sort of social, political, or philosophical beliefs they may have."⁵²

This being the situation, flag burning simply does not qualify as symbolic speech: "Far from being a case of 'one picture being worth a thousand words,' flag burning is the equivalent of an inarticulate grunt or roar that, it seems fair to say, is most likely to be indulged in not to express any particular idea, but to antagonize others."⁵³ Justice Stevens agreed with Rehnquist that flag burning lacked any discernable propositional content, arguing that "[t]he case has nothing to do with 'disagreeable ideas,'" and rather involved "disagreeable conduct that, in my opinion, diminishes the value of an important national asset."⁵⁴ The Court's free speech doctrine, he argued, was rendered inapplicable by the case's "intangible dimension."⁵⁵

Neither of the dissents addressed the basic problem raised by their line of argument. As Steven Gey observes, "[a]ll proponents of flag protection legislation rely in some fashion on the argument that the flag is 'special.'" But when "they attempt to define the 'special' characteristics of the flag they inevitably do so in a way that highlights the unavoidably expressive nature of the flag."⁵⁶ Justice Stevens asserts that flag burning "diminishes the value of an important national asset." But what is this asset other than the fact that most Americans believe certain things? And what is it to diminish this asset other than to change what they believe? Rehnquist objected to the contradiction of a government that "may conscript men into the Armed Forces where they must fight and perhaps die for the flag" but "may not prohibit the public burning of the banner under which they fight."⁵⁷ But surely, no one is prepared to

⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 405.

⁵¹ Ibid., pg. 434.

⁵² Ibid., pg. 429.

⁵³ Ibid., pg. 432.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 428.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 436.

⁵⁶ Steven G. Gey, *This is not a Flag: The Aesthetics of Desecration*, 1990 Wis. L. Rev. 1549, 1575 (1990).

⁵⁷ Ibid., pg. 435.

die for a piece of cloth, but only for *the ideas and interests it represents*. “Dying for the flag” may be unobjectionable as a figure of speech, but Justice Rehnquist seems to be exploiting this figure of speech in order to obscure the First Amendment stakes, viewpoint discrimination. He compares flag burning to an “inarticulate grunt or roar” that was only intended to offend. But he does not explain the source of the offensiveness. What could this be other than the communication of an offensive *idea*?

The logical structure of the disagreement is clear. A prohibition on flag-burning can qualify as viewpoint discrimination because flag-burning seems to consist in two phenomena: 1) the physical alterations of a material substance and 2) the communication through that alteration of various propositions from one mind to others—a “short cut from mind to mind” as the Court put it. The first is not intrinsically harmful while the second is harmful only by virtue of the ideas it communicates. Only by *rejecting this bifurcation*, then—the premise that the flag and its burning are reducible to their physical and mental components—can this conclusion be avoided. Since the dissents do seek to avoid this conclusion, it follows that they are implicitly imputing to the flag *an ontological status that is neither strictly physical nor strictly subjective or mental*, imputing to the flag *a meaning that transcends the representational function* it plays for individuals conveying viewpoints.

But this is precisely what we have come to understand as the pre-modern condition, which precludes any clear line between mind and matter or between agency and thing. Critiquing the Court’s decision, Paul Greenberg argues:

[I]f a nation lives by its symbols, it also dies with them...There are some so rooted in history and custom, and in the heroic imagination of a nation, that they transcend the merely symbolic; they become presences...Today’s strange arguments from our best-and-brightest against protecting the national emblem are not symptomatic of any kind of treason-of-the-intellectuals, but of a different malady; an isolating intellectualism cut off from a sense of reverence, and so from the historical memory and heroic imagination that determines the fate of any nation.⁵⁸

To speak of the flag as a “presence” is to speak of it as a *charged object* that is at once an agent and a thing. *This* is what makes the flag “special.” So much was suggested by Rehnquist himself, who, borrowing from Justice Fortas, imputed to the flag “a special kind of personality.”⁵⁹ The flag does not merely *represent* the notion that patriotism is a good thing, but rather *presents* us with a claim. The power exercised by the flag is not something which individuals exercise upon one another *through the flag*, by communicating their “viewpoints,” but something which they permit the flag itself to achieve *through them*. This is why Justice Rehnquist could observe that many Americans regard the flag with “an almost

⁵⁸ Qt. in Robert H. Bork, *Slouching toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Regan Books, 2003), pg. 101.

⁵⁹ *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397, 432-33 (U.S., 1989).

mystical reverence.” Understood in pre-modern terms, patriotism is not a viewpoint one might undertake to advance, but an objective power that manifests itself in the awe with which true patriots encounter the flag. The flag can be a “presence” because it is, to use Taylor’s metaphor “a source of light or heat” — through contact with which individuals uphold the order of things. The patriot is not the propagator of a particular viewpoint, but the recipient of the flag’s warmth.

The question of whether a prohibition on flag burning constitutes viewpoint discrimination is therefore *a question about the relative legitimacy of modern and pre-modern cosmological orientation*. For these are the lenses through which the stakes are being implicitly framed. If those supporting the Court’s decision were victims to an “an isolating intellectualism cut off from a sense of reverence,” this is because they are insensible to the flag’s status as “a source of light or heat,” unnaturally *buffered* from the order to which others remain attuned. To deny that prohibitions on flag burning constitute viewpoint discrimination is to uphold that order, to implicitly posit a pre-modern cosmos within which things can be laden with a significance that human agents discover but do not generate.

It was precisely this kind of significance—the flag’s status as an agent/thing—that was being denied by the Court majority. For its opinion was just a further step in the modern rejection of anthropocentricity, a demand for a rigorous division of the world into subjective and objective. In concluding that what Texas held up as a public asset that is ontologically independent of individuals’ attitudes toward was in fact just an unacknowledged reference to these attitudes, the Court aspired to a non-anthropocentric description of flag-burning and its impact, conceptualizing our feelings toward the flag as subjective projections rather than *responses* to an objective order. Greenberg speaks of the flag’s “presence.” But from a naturalistic standpoint, it is only the flag’s physical properties that are ever truly present. In invoking the existence of a “presence,” Greenberg was merely indulging in teleological libertinism, rationalizing as some special insight what was actually his inability to “distance” himself from these subjective meanings and operate as a strategic agent within a “neutral” environment. In refusing to give Greenberg’s disposition legal effect, the Court announced that it too operates in a neutral environment. *Texas v. Johnson* therefore helped enshrine the buffered identity into law, announcing that the latter will not dignify sentiments that cannot be translated into non-anthropocentric terms.

* * *

The right to burn the flag is now settled law. But it is this same clash of cosmological orientation that informs liberals’ and conservatives’ attitudes toward patriotism more generally. Responding to John O’Sullivan’s accusation that liberals disdain “the patriotism of ordinary people” as “something simplistic,

vulgar, shameful, and thus to be avoided,” Nunberg retorts that while conservatives will insinuate that liberals have divided loyalties, the accusation itself shows that liberals’ disloyalty isn’t actually “to their nation but to the values and tastes of ‘regular Americans.’”⁶⁰ Conservatives who insinuate that liberals are unpatriotic are not talking about anyone’s concrete acts or omissions, as “when people applied the word to hoarders in World War II or to draft evaders during Vietnam.” For the concept of patriotism has at the hands of conservatives become “really a matter of values and style, of conveying ‘toughness,’ and of subscribing to a particularly combative view of America’s role [in the world].”⁶¹

But what might be discounted as mere taste or style assumes a greater significance within the mutation counter-narrative, which reveals the cosmological dimension of the patriotism debate. Queried by CNN about her suggestion that “certain parts of America...are maybe more American than other parts of America,” Sarah Palin clarified:

I don't want that misunderstood. No, I do not want that misunderstood. You know, when I go to these rallies and we see the patriotism just shining through these people's faces and the Vietnam veterans wearing their hats so proudly and they have tears in their eyes as we sing our national anthem and it is so inspiring and I say that this is true America, you get it, you understand how important it is that in the next four years we have a leader who will fight for you. I certainly don't want that interpreted as one area being more patriotic or more American than another. If that's the way it's come across, I apologize.⁶²

Palin was in fact being sincere in avowing that she was not strictly identifying patriotism with certain geographical regions. For any geographical allusions she may have made were only crude proxies for her actual position, which is that pre-modern, less buffered, America is more American than modern, more buffered America—a distinction that to an extent correlates with, but is irreducible to, geography. What, after all, is the “patriotism just shining through these people’s faces” but the patriotism of porous selves, of selves who, not being buffered from that patriotism, can be “invaded” by it? Bellicose toughness is not the essence of conservatives’ patriotism, but merely the easiest and most common outlet for the expression of that porousness. It is direct evidence that one has been appropriately “seized” by one’s patriotism without the mediation of the buffered self’s “inner base area,” gripped by it as a spirit force that shapes one’s very sense of agency. This is precisely what the Veterans’ tears symbolized for Palin.

The patriotism of conservatives is their *acquiescence in the embodied feelings of the higher* which the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity seek to extirpate. And this is precisely the threat they see coming from unpatriotic liberal elites, the reason why John Kerry derived so little political mileage

⁶⁰ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 197.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 196.

⁶² <http://www.progressive.org/node/124677/81180>

from his Vietnam War record in his 2004 presidential run. His persona was quintessentially buffered—“haughty, French-looking” and marked by an “out-of-touch aristocratic bearing” as Anderson describes him.⁶³ And this vitiated everything else in the eyes of more porous Americans. If the liberal elites are, as the conservatives complain, “out of touch” with the lived experience of “ordinary Americans,” this is a detachment, not from their empirical condition, but from their cosmological orientation. The liberal identity is premised on the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, and this places it in necessary conflict with those whose patriotism resists that ethos. Liberals will insist that their patriotism is the reflective patriotism of ideals and principles rather than the unreflective patriotism of blood, soil, and language. In this vein, Nunberg argues that “there is no question that the vast majority of American liberals are patriotic.” If liberals “have reservations about past and present policies, it’s most often because they believe those policies fail to live up to the best American ideals, usually a sign of patriotism and optimism in itself.”⁶⁴ But while the patriotism of ideals and principles may be defensible in terms of ideals and principles, this is a circular, unpersuasive logic to those whose patriotism is more pre-modern, less “excarinated” and more “enfleshed.”

Responding to studies suggesting that conservatives view the world with less nuance and complexity than do liberals, Coulter explained: “Whenever you have backed a liberal into a corner—if he doesn’t start crying—he says, ‘It’s a complicated issue.’ Loving America is too simple an emotion. To be nuanced you have to hate it a little. Conservatives may not grasp ‘nuance,’ but we’re pretty good at grasping treason.”⁶⁵ The “treason” grasped by Coulter and other conservatives is simply a corollary of the buffered identity and its peculiarly courtly rationality, the corollary of an affective-instinctual structure that, as Elias says, embraces that “co-existence of positive and negative elements, a mixture of muted affection and muted dislike in varying proportions and nuances.” By contrast, the simple emotions endorsed by Coulter recapitulate what Elias describes as the “peculiar black-and-white colouring” of medieval books, which know of “nothing but good friends or villains.” Conservatives are “pretty good at grasping treason” because they process liberal nuance in *pre-epistemological terms*, at the level of cosmological orientation, the overall human make-up, as a form of nonexplicit engagement with the world that sacrifice “embodied feelings of the higher” on the altar of the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. Coulter refuses to accept liberal nuance at face value because refuses to accept the

⁶³ Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005), pg. 117.

⁶⁴ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 190.

⁶⁵ Qt. in Chris Mooney, *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), pg. 60.

identity that it expresses at face value, which is why she must reduce that nuance to its cruder constituent parts, a little love and a little hate. In this way does she affirm the a more pre-modern instinctual-affective structure against the liberalism that threatens it.

Liberals claim to “love” their country. But as Goldberg observes, their attitudes do not comport with any normal understanding of what it is to love:

[I]magine a man who relishes going out of the way to point out how his wife isn’t all that special. You might think that guy isn’t wholly committed to her. And if a woman said, “My daughter is fine, but she’s really no better than any other kid,” you might think she’s lacking in the maternal-love department. This illustrates a truth about how love works. At some basic level, if you love something, you must find it preferable to something else, perhaps everything else. Your reasons can be subjective or simply impossible to quantify. Love, true love, is a mystery.⁶⁶

What liberals present as their “reservations about past and present policies” is as conservatives see it merely a pretext for the relish with which they go out of their way to point out how America isn’t all that special, how America is fine but really no better than any other country. How, then, can they claim to love America? There is no precise formula for gauging when a husband has ceased loving his wife. Adultery may constitute clear proof. But certainly, this wife need not wait until her husband actually embarks on an affair before she may discern signs of his discontent and arrive at her proper conclusions. And this is also the reason why conservatives do not feel they require evidence that liberals are actually cooperating with America’s enemies before issuing their accusations, because the mere intellectualization of patriotism through “reservations about past and present policies” is already the seeds of betrayal. It is such, not because such reservations are intrinsically unpatriotic, but because liberal patriotism has been *defined* in terms of them and because this definition “buffers” liberals from the embodied feeling through which conservatives define patriotism. Conservative aspersions on liberal patriotism are not contrived. On the contrary, they are simply the way in which a more porous consciousness must process a more buffered one.

Liberal attitudes toward what conservatives uphold as patriotism must likewise be understood at the level of cosmological orientation, as the way in which a more buffered consciousness must process a more porous one. Noemie Emery wrote in the *Weekly Standard* that after 9/11 “[t]entatively, slowly, some [liberals] are allowing themselves now to feel warm toward their country, embarrassed though they may be by these primordial feelings.”⁶⁷ But these “primordial feelings” are cause not only for embarrassment but more importantly for apprehension. For this indulgence in embodied feeling is understood to be the surrender of the buffered identity’s disengaged self-possession. And this surrender

⁶⁶ Jonah Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas* (Sentinel 2012), pg. 126.

⁶⁷ Qt. in Nunberg, *Talking Right*, 189..

augurs patriotism's slide into fanaticism and xenophobia, a pagan idolatry that cannot distinguish America's highest moral ideals from the contingent material and cultural formations in which they have been imperfectly instantiated. "True love" is a mystery, as Goldberg says. And this means that the motivations of conservatives, the true lovers of their country, will remain unfathomable, liable to the wildly oscillating passions that marked the pre-modern condition. If liberals look askance at conservative patriotism, this is because conservative patriots are, to borrow from Mahmoud, "unruly subjects," who refuse "the 'civility' of secular norms and conventions."

This is why Goldberg can correctly observe that liberals are more disturbed by extreme pro-Americanism than by extreme anti-Americanism.⁶⁸ Extreme anti-Americanism may be unreasonable and possibly dangerous, but it is extreme pro-Americanism that stands in the way of liberalism's disciplinary agenda, which is to suppress the ordinary American's default porousness in order to inculcate the buffered identity. What conservatives believe is the contempt with which the elites look upon the patriotism of ordinary Americans does *not* in the first instance refer to any self-consciously entertained mental state. That is the "fundamentalist" interpretation of conservative claims of cultural oppression. Understood in the context of the mutation counter-narrative, that contempt is inherent to *the structure of the buffered identity*, which understands itself as possessed of a privileged lucidity that eludes teleological libertines failing to rise above anthropocentricity.

This "elitism" was the *social meaning* of *Texas v. Johnson*. Defending free speech is not the same as approving of the particular speech being defended. But the initial conceptualization of flag burning as symbolic expression presupposes a rejection of anthropocentricity. And this rejection can in turn pave the way for various biological and social explanations for the ordinary American's sense that the flag is a "presence" rather than a mere symbol. The disengaged non-anthropocentric stance can, for example, allow us to conceptualize patriotism as an evolved disposition toward rigid in-group/out-group thinking which, though indispensable in the ancestral environment our evolution, is profoundly out of place in the modern world, to whose complexities this ancient reflex is inadequate. And so what was formerly understood as desecration is reduced to Hobbesian "annoyance," a biological glitch in our rationality to be taken with a grain of salt. This is nothing that the Court actually maintained, of course, but it is implicit in the cosmological orientation underpinning what it did maintain. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are reactions to this layer of our experience, not to liberal ideas or liberal intentions but to *the structural possibilities implicit in liberals' nonexplicit engagement with the world*. What gets framed as a

68

debate about ideas has as its deepest subject matter what are diverging overall human make-ups and the implications they carry for each other, the ways in which they *must* seek to discredit one another.

Goldberg writes that though liberals will whine “about how Republicans use patriotism as a wedge against their opponents, the reality is more complicated,” for liberals “are uncomfortable with the topic of patriotism because their core philosophical impulses are to make America a different country than it is.”⁶⁹ The reality is indeed more complicated. But the reason is not liberal aversion to the country such as it is, but the fact that America from its very inception embodied a contradictory *mélange* of cosmological impulses, whose resultant tensions continue to be played out to this very day underneath the surface of what may appear like purely theoretical disagreements.

Pre-modern societies, Taylor explains, understood their foundations as residing in a “time of origins,” a “higher time, filled with agents of a superior kind, which we should ceaselessly try to re-approach.”⁷⁰ But modern social imaginaries take the idea of foundations “out of the mythical early time” and turns it into “something that people can do today,” something “that can be brought about by collective action in contemporary, purely secular time.”⁷¹ The United States is on one level the preeminent example of the latter, a nation of individuals who deliberate and collaborate in furtherance of the common good. And yet what can be understood as the resolution of a collective action problem has paradoxically been invested with a pre-modern significance, as a mythical higher time, a special dispensation whose meaning must be continuously reappropriated in order to reinvigorate the present. These are the impulses that animate conservative patriotism. Conservative values are American values because it is the ordinary American who through his allegiance to traditional values remains most connected to America’s founding as a “higher time, filled with agents of a superior kind.” Liberals disagree. And it is this conflict that gives rise to the patriotism controversy, and determines whether one will view the flag as a symbolic instrument through which debate, and therefore collective action, can proceed, or else as a charged object, the sacred embodiment of a higher time whose power sustains and reinvigorates the present.

Conservatives pay considerable homage to the proposition that America, unlike the nations of Europe, is defined by “ideas.” But their less than fully “excarinated” understanding of patriotism reveals that they cannot take such high-minded proclamations to their logical conclusion. For that logical conclusion could well involve conceptualizing patriotism as nothing more than a cultural modification of

⁶⁹ Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Cliches*, pg. 127.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 208.

⁷¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 197.

an evolved in-group/out-group disposition—clearly not the kind of patriotism Palin was admiring at her rallies. One cannot love America both as the nation that it is and as a nation of ideas because respect for ideas necessarily implies the possibility that we should “make America a different country than it is”—which Goldberg and other conservatives see as a liberal perversion of true patriotism. Though conservatives profess a commitment to American exceptionalism, that exceptionalism appears vitiated by their pre-modern sensibilities.

4. An Insurrection of Subjugated Knowledges

The patriotism controversy crystallizes my thesis with unusual clarity. As we shall now see, conservatives’ broader sense of their situation, and so too of America’s historical predicament, can be understood in the very same terms, as a conflict of cosmological orientations pitting the buffered identity against those who remain recalcitrant to its disciplines and repressions. It is this recalcitrance, and not “tradition” as such, that drives conservative claims of cultural oppression onward.

Examining the roots of what he anticipates will be the “next American civil war”—this time between liberal elites and ordinary Americans—Lee Harris concedes that the “populist conservatives” of the Tea Party movement have been susceptible to paranoid conspiracy-mongering, as in their worries about Obamacare “death panels.”⁷² Moreover, their appeal to the yeoman virtues of a rugged, republican individualism is an exercise in political nostalgia. They are no more interested than anyone else in returning to the harsh, life-threatening conditions of frontier life.⁷³ That nostalgia is also at odds with their insistence that America retain its status as the planet’s preeminent military superpower, which presupposes a far larger government than was ever countenanced in the national past they idealize.⁷⁴ And in bewailing the depredations of overbearing liberal elites, populist conservatives betray their blindness to the existence of “impersonal forces far beyond the control of even the most cunning and ingenious cabal of villains.”⁷⁵ Their affinity for doctrinaire libertarianism furthermore blinds them to the problems created by corrupt corporate executives and amoral financial consortiums, responsibility for which cannot fairly be laid at the feet of big government.⁷⁶ It also lands them in the contradiction of

⁷² Lee Harris, *The Next American Civil War: The Populist Revolt Against the Liberal Elite* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pg. 7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pg. 49.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 54-56.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

unselfconsciously taking for granted some government programs, like Medicare, at the same time as they remain ideologically opposed to others.⁷⁷

On these and similar points, Harris is in agreement with liberals. But unlike liberals, he also insists that it “does not matter greatly whether the resentment and resistance makes sense logically or is backed by solid evidence.”⁷⁸ For the grievances of the populist conservative are rooted, not in any kind of social or economic theory that could be rationally evaluated, but in “a specific character type,” the “natural libertarian” who becomes “ornery” whenever “he feels that his self-image as a free and independent individual is under assault.”⁷⁹ “Ornery Americans” are the heirs of the Jacksonian spirit, the egalitarian ethos of independence and self-sufficiency that once defined America.⁸⁰ And their populist conservatism is their attempt to keep this ethos alive against the efforts of the liberal elites to destroy it. In resisting the forces that seek to tame and subdue them, they seek to “hold back, at least for another day, the dusk of decadence that comes whenever the forces of order have triumphed too completely over the anarchic will of free men.”⁸¹

This goal is the reason why populist conservatives are not “particularly interested in honing beautifully crafted logical arguments” and “feel no shame in vulgar rabble-rousing.”⁸² For their ultimate aim is simply to maintain this resistance by any means necessary. The resistance and resentment may often assume the form of paranoid fantasy. But the underlying principles are sound. The populist conservatives of the Tea Party movement are to be celebrated, not for the accuracy of their assertions, the cogency of their arguments, or the wisdom of their prescriptions, but for *the kind of people they are*, ornery Americans. To critique Tea Party conservatism intellectually is therefore to commit a category error. These conservatives’ anger is not ultimately “driven by intellectual arguments” and therefore “cannot be brought to an end through intellectual arguments.”⁸³ Their objections to this or that federal program may be less than cogent. But the “the ostensible issues,” says Harris, “are always secondary,”⁸⁴ merely the accidental mediums through which something more fundamental is being asserted. And this is the anarchic will of free men, which the elites are hell bent on extirpating but which the populist conservative will defend at all costs.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 210-11.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 217.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 217.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 157.

⁸¹ Ibid., 237.

⁸² Ibid., 40.

⁸³ Ibid., 137.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 124.

The dislocation of traditional ideological boundaries appears complete, with Harris self-consciously celebrating as conservative virtues precisely those qualities which the Right has traditionally associated with the radicals of the Left, and especially those of the 1960s, who were condemned for having seized upon specific grievances as pretexts for their own anarchic will. If the ostensible issues are always secondary, this is because they are, just as Kimball said of the 1960s, mere “rallying points for a revolution in sensibilities.” This dislocation is exactly what should be expected if conservative claims of cultural oppression represent *the counter-culture to the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity*, the counter-culture to the civilizing process, which is my argument here. Hofstadter writes:

America was settled by men and women who repudiated European civilization for its oppressiveness or decadence, among other reasons, and who found the most striking thing on the American strand not in the rude social forms that were taking shape here but in the world of nature and of savages. The escape from civilization to Arcadia, from Europe to nature, was perpetuated in repeated escapes from the East to the West, from the settled world to the frontier. Again and again the American mind turned fretfully against the encroachments of organized society, which were felt to be an effort to reimpose what had been once thrown off; for civilization, though it could hardly be repudiated in its entirety, was still believed to have something pernicious about it.⁸⁵

These repeated escapes from the settled world to the frontier in search of savage nature may not seem intrinsically political. But the impulses which animated these escapes can become politicized inasmuch as the civilization which they resisted has been identified with the left wing of the American political spectrum, where the buffered identity has been most thoroughly internalized. And this is precisely what conservative claims of cultural oppression do. These claims transform liberal positions into symbolic representations of the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, which is precisely why conservatives see coercion and intimidation where liberals see nothing of great significance.

Speaking satirically for the Left, Kahane describes the debasement into which liberalism has thrust the contemporary American conservative:

From a nation of free men and women, who once crossed the Great Plains in prairie schooners, conquered the Rockies, sent whaling ships around the world, and rose to defend freedom wherever and whenever it was threatened by people like—well, like us—you have become a nation of sheep, cowering disarmed and unmanned in your homes, worrying about the children. Which you don’t have any of, since we have also convinced you that having kids is selfish, that we’re destroying the planet with our very presence, that we have to reduce our “carbon footprint” (how I laugh everytime I hear those words, since we are carbon-based life forms), and, my own personal favorite, that it would be a crime to bring children into a world as horrid as this one.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), pg. 49.

⁸⁶ David Kahane, *Rules for Radical Conservatives: Beating the Left at Its Own Game to Take Back America* (Ballantine Books, 2010), pg. 111.

Kahane's nostalgia for these "free men and women" and their more adventurous lives is not nostalgia for medieval Europe. But their appeal for, and idealization by, Kahane and other conservatives is the outcome of America's historic reservations about "civilization," which have limited the internalization of the buffered identity that is more fully accepted in Europe, leaving some segments of the population with a "residual porousness" in search of some outlet. The Americans who braved the Great Plains and the Rockies were not necessarily invaded by spirits, brought within their "field of force." But they could find themselves invaded by other imperatives more powerfully than can be countenanced by the liberal dispensation, leading lives whose meaning was less rooted in the buffered self's "inner base area," in which embodied feelings of the higher played more of a role.

Kahane's "free men and women" may have been beholden to certain narrow sympathies and parochial prejudices. But they were also free from the tighter regimes of affective-instinctual control that define later stages of the civilizing process. They had the anarchic will of free men, if nothing else. And it is in precisely this will that their greater freedom consisted, an inner, spiritual freedom for which the Rockies and Great Plains are merely tangible symbols. Conservative claimants of cultural oppression resent, not modern society *per se*—whose comforts and conveniences they do not, as Harris notes, really care to repudiate—but rather the *organized affect structure* that emerges out of it, the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity. In issuing their claims of cultural oppression, conservatives express their longing for a mode of experience that is less compromised by this sociability's demands—less rationalized, intellectualized, and disengaged—a yearning for what they intuit to be human nature's default, and hence authentic, form of consciousness. This longing is the deeper meaning of the orneriness in relation to which the ostensible issues are always secondary.

It is also the reason why young conservative Todd Sweeney can argue that "conservative and punk sensibilities naturally complement each other."⁸⁷ Conservatives, observes Sweeney, are naturally "drawn to imagery and a tone conveying order and discipline—respectability and reverence." But while conservatives should indeed defend traditional values, they also need a more expansive and more accurate understanding of what those values consist in. For the nation whose goodness they defend has stood, not only for peace and security, but equally for the risk and adventure in which America was once plentiful but which liberalism now seeks to eliminate.⁸⁸ After all, America is a nation that invented the cowboys and the frontier, as well as jazz, flappers, beatniks, bikers, rock 'n' roll, and the anarchic punk

⁸⁷ Ibid., pg. 193.

⁸⁸ Todd Seavey, *Conservatism for Punks*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010), pgs. 195-96.

movement. And it has since rediscovered those roots in the Tea Party movement, a reminder that Americans have not always been servile before government. America being a country founded on freedom and rebellion, it is a serious mistake for conservatives “to accept the mantle of the fuddy-duddies” and let “the country’s free spirits, creative types, young people, and individualists go running to the other camp, where they’ll end up, in a tragic non sequitur, aiding and abetting stifling collectivist bureaucracies like the Environmental Protection Agency.”⁸⁹ Conservatives can see themselves as the true individualists because they identify the individualism of liberals with the ordering impulses of the buffered identity, which is what punk conservatism resists. Like the elites of old, today’s liberals insist that the lower orders be “not left as they are, but badgered bullied, pushed, preached at, drilled, and organized to abandon their lax and disordered folkways and conform to one or another feature of civil behavior.” Seen in the context of the mutation counter-narrative, the E.P.A. and other liberal institutions are merely carrying forth this longstanding tradition. Conservatives understand their conservatism as their resistance to the badgering and bullying, and this is why they cannot see liberals as tyrants and usurpers, crypto-fascists who are always scheming to undermine the natural liberty of the conservative. Liberalism has become ascendant, not by providing compelling solutions to discrete problems, but by suppressing and discrediting the free human nature that the conservative strives to retain. Such is the “big picture” that conservative claims of cultural oppression strive to expose but which liberalism’s rationalistic façade strives to conceal.

It is the ordering impulses of the buffered identity that renders liberalism “un-American” in the eyes of conservatives. If conservative claims of cultural oppression accuse liberals of betraying a collective faith in American exceptionalism in favor of the universalistic Hellenism of a Europe, this simply reflects the claimants’ own identification of Europe with the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. Hence Codevilla’s warning that the “Ruling Class” seeks to establish an administrative state that will reduce “American families to Swedish levels of intellectual and moral subordination to government ‘science,’”⁹⁰ and his lament that the Democratic Party has “transformed itself into a unity with near-European discipline.”⁹¹ One might question whether Swedes are really so deferential toward their government, or whether European political parties and the Democrats are actually more disciplined and unified than the Republicans. But these ostensibly empirical claims are merely the *mediums* through which conservatives endeavor to articulate something more fundamental. The ostensible issues are, as

⁸⁹ Ibid., pg. 192.

⁹⁰ Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Ruling Class: How They Corrupted America and What We Can Do About It* (Beauford Books 2010), pg. 67.

⁹¹ Ibid., pg. 77.

Harris observes, always secondary. And what is primary is the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, the ultimate target of conservative claims of cultural oppression.

* * *

Hofstadter associates one strand of American anti-intellectualism with a disposition that, having elevated hatred into a creed, is filled “with obscure and ill-directed grievances and frustrations, with elaborate hallucinations about secrets and conspiracies.”⁹² But this kind of anti-intellectualism should not, Hofstadter emphasizes, be confused with the “highbrow anti-rationalism” of philosophers like Nietzsche or Heidegger, which was not the subject of his study.⁹³ However, my argument here is that what liberals dismiss as know-nothing anti-intellectualism has a distinctive structure that is illuminated by highbrow anti-rationalism—which is exactly what I have been endeavoring to do. Arguing that the anti-intellectualism first examined by Hofstadter has only become aggravated in recent years, Jacoby writes that many conservatives have been caught up in the pretense that ordinary, semi-educated “folk” are the repository of greater wisdom than “the elites.” They are therefore “incapable of admitting that a great many Americans lack the knowledge needed to make informed decisions about public affairs.”⁹⁴ Even moderates, she laments, have been “in no way immune to the overwhelming pull of belief systems that treat evidence as a tiresome stumbling block to deeper, instinctive ‘ways of knowing.’”⁹⁵ But I am here arguing that these “deeper, instinctive ‘ways of knowing’” have an identifiable content. They reflect, not any brute impatience with evidence and argument, but what is conservatives’ *largely intuitive, under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative*. For this is exactly what the highbrow rationalism reveals.

This under-theorized understanding is why Nunberg can observe that Republicans have been remarkably successful when it comes to embedding their positions in a narrative that “manages to be evocative without being specific,”⁹⁶ a narrative that in “giv[ing] values flesh” can elicit emotions that abstract values alone cannot elicit.⁹⁷ That narrative is in reality the mutation counter-narrative. And it can give conservative values flesh because it tracks the development of the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are the convoluted record of those

⁹² Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, pg. 37.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 8.

⁹⁴ Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), pg. 297.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 211.

⁹⁶ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 14.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 104.

disciplines and repressions, as well as a convoluted protest by the human unconscious against them. They are significant, not for what they might reveal about empirical reality in any narrowly factual sense, but for what they reveal about what Taylor calls the “sedimentation of the past in the present,” significant as symbolic protests against the historical forces that have been built into our contemporary western consciousness. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are what Foucault calls “an insurrection of subjugated knowledges.” This is knowledge “located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity,” knowledge in which “lay the memory of hostile encounters,” knowledge which “owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it.”⁹⁸ Those hostile encounters are the badgering, bullying, and scolding with which modern elites have always sought to impose their disciplinary impulses, which have now become nearly invisible, taken for granted as “natural.” This problem may be articulated through various empirical claims many of which can be proven false. But the empirical claims are most profoundly understood as symbolic efforts to expose the contingency of the buffered identity, the buffered identity as the outcome of a parochial culture that hides itself behind a universalistic facade.

Thus, Kahane charges that liberals prefer to undertake their struggles in the courtroom, a forum, not for truth “but for nonmortal combat in which victory goes to the clever, not to the strong.”⁹⁹ And liberals will naturally dismiss all this as empty bluster and chest-thumping. Their professions of all-American ruggedness notwithstanding, the overwhelming majority of conservatives would no less than liberals prefer to resolve their grievances in court rather than with their fists. But this fact is not the end of the story. For we can, if we listen, hear echoes of the pre-modern’s resistance to the modern manifesting itself. What is Kahane’s implicit endorsement of physical violence but an unwitting allusion to a time when, as Elias puts it, “the hatters, the tailors, the shepherds, were all quick to draw their knives”? What is “the mortal combat of life” other than “the incurable unrest, the perpetual proximity of danger, the whole atmosphere of this unpredictable and insecure life” that inflamed the wildly oscillating passions of premoderns? Kahane also accuses that progressives are “telling you at every turn what you may or may not do, what you should eat and shouldn’t smoke, where you must put your trash, your ‘recyclables,’ even your grass clippings—and all for your own good.”¹⁰⁰ And what is this protest against regulated disposal of grass clippings but a contemporary recapitulation of what we observed to be medieval *laissez-aller*, with its lax, tolerant attitudes toward all things organic?

⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pgs. 81-83.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 155.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 15..

It will be objected that, whether defensible or not, the duty to recycle and appropriately dispose of grass clippings is hardly a significant obstacle to anyone's personal liberty or dignity and that grievances to this effect are therefore just distractions from more substantive issues. But the critical theory of the Right must be judged by the same principles that guide the critical theory of the Left, by the same principles that liberals invoke in defense of their preferred victims. As mere words, racial slurs might also be dismissed as insignificant, as simply irrelevant to the big picture of African-American advancement. But we can all recognize that the offense cannot be reduced to mere individual "name-calling," because the racist is, in deploying his slur, concomitantly invoking an entire history of racial injustice, bringing to bear on the situation, not only his own personal attitude, but the entire accretion of social attitudes that make up that history. Here is Foucault's "memory of hostile encounters," which liberals believe shapes the objective social context in which African-Americans are compelled to operate. And I am arguing that something like this is also transpiring in the context of the regulations whose oppressiveness Kahane and other conservatives seem to be histrionically exaggerating. These regulations may be only trivially inconvenient when considered in the abstract. But they assume a special significance in the context of the mutation counter-narrative, wherein the domination of the unwashed "folk" by disciplinarian elites is always lying in the background as the storyline into which contemporary events will be unconsciously fitted. And this is what Kahane is doing. Conservative claims of cultural oppression employ politics as the medium through which the buffered identity may be protested. This is what their symbolic politics are symbolic of, what unites what would otherwise seem like a "curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs about the world," as Frank says. If liberals cannot see how these beefs are related, this is because their allegiance to the subtraction account blinds them to the origin of these grievances in the imposition of a contingent, historically constructed understanding of human agency. Being beholden to the subtraction account of modernity and secularity, liberals cannot recognize this contingency, which is why conservative claims of cultural oppression inevitably strike them as contrived.

As we saw, Kahane attributes to liberals the view that "it would be a crime to bring children into a world as horrid as this one." And this charge once again reflects how a more porous self must process a more buffered one. For what liberals understand to be their broader social consciousness is, on the mutation counter-narrative, the more thoroughgoing secularization of the City of God and its moral rigors. And this secularization must strike those who resist it—those more resigned to the persistence of sin and disorder in the world—as a nihilistic hostility to life as it is and must be, a humorless moralism and desire to castigate sin, as Taylor characterizes the work of Religious Reform. Hence Kahan's impression that liberals are fundamentally pessimistic, which reflects the unnaturally stringent moral standards implicit in

their judgments. This stringency is why Kahane can furthermore charge that liberals are “getting into your head. Making you feel uncomfortable in your own country. In your own home. In your own skin. Making you feel *guilty*.”¹⁰¹ Following Hofstadter, liberals will dismiss these accusations as “obscure and ill-directed grievances and frustrations, with elaborate hallucinations about secrets and conspiracies.” But the mutation counter-narrative endows these grievances and frustrations with a new coherence. For what is this sense of having one’s very sense of agency compromised by an alien force other than what Elias calls “the retrained instinctual and affective impulses” which, having been “denied direct access to the motor apparatus,” have come to constitute the foundations of buffered interiority? *This* is the guilt that liberals stand accused of seeking to instill in conservatives. If liberals do not feel this guilt, this is because it is a guilt with which they more fully identify as a feature of their hero-system, a guilt from which they can derive a spiritual meaning. But this meaning is unavailable for recalcitrant conservatives who, though more Christian theologically, are less Christian existentially and cosmologically, retaining more of the residual paganism which Religious Reform sought to extirpate—an agenda that is now being carried forth by liberalism.

The difference between liberals and conservatives is *not* the difference between secularism and religion, but a difference in *the degree to which the latter has been compressed into the former*. Conservatives can decry a “religion of secularism” or a “religion of secular humanism” where liberals see only the histrionic posturing of populist rabble-rousers because where liberals see the categorical *subtraction* of religion, bare secularism, conservatives see what Taylor describes as the *compression* of the religious and the secular into a “spiritual-secular whole.” That is, they discern the religious origins of what liberals accept as liberated human nature—which they themselves do not experience as liberating. This compression also explains how conservatives can casually oscillate between accusing liberals of moral subjectivism, relativism, or nihilism and accusing them of insufferable moralistic zealotry. The compression qualifies as nihilistic when viewed from the side of the religious—e.g., the loss of traditional values—and morally puritanical when viewed from that of the secular—e.g., liberals’ totalitarian will to impose their politically correct utopias. Both characterizations ultimately refer us to the same phenomenon seen from different angles, each of which articulates how a more pre-modern consciousness must process a more modern one. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are not contrived because they are, properly understood, *logically derivable* from what is a clash of cosmological orientations. They

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pg. 30.

seek to “make medievalism modern,” as Robin says. And this is because they endeavor to articulate the modern condition in terms of the medieval tensions from which it first emerged.

Conservatives’ own position as (relative) pre-moderns provides them with a vantage point from which to actually *see* what the more modern liberals can only *live*. In this regard, they occupy a position analogous to the one with which the Left often credits women and oppressed minorities, outsiders who by virtue of their disenfranchisement can dimly perceive power structures and cultural messages which must go unnoticed by the more privileged, who take these for granted as the natural order of things. Conservatives viscerally sense what Nilüfer Göle calls “the powers of the secular”:

The powers of the secular can be traced in its capacity to develop a set of disciplinary practices, both corporal and spatial, that are inseparable from the formations of the secular self. Secularism is about state politics, lawmaking, and constitutional principles, but foremost it permeates and establishes the rhythm of a phenomenology of everyday life practices. Secularism is not a “neutral,” power-free space and a set of abstract principles; it is embodied in people’s agencies and imaginaries.¹⁰²

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression possess *some* understanding of the mutation counter-narrative because they possess an intuitive acquaintance with the disciplinary powers whose emergence it chronicles. With these powers having colonized their very life-worlds—their own “agencies and imaginaries,” structuring the “rhythm” of their “everyday life practices”—they have an unconscious memory of the forces that created the present. But lacking a conceptual grasp of the actual historical dynamics that would explain this memory, the claimants simply identify it with the left wing of the American political spectrum, whose policies express the most thoroughgoing internalization of the buffered identity. In so doing, they *misarticulate* the “powers of the secular,” misarticulate what is a *phenomenological* oppression, in the language of “abstract principle”—as in the cognitive elites’ conviction that they are entitled to rule over ordinary Americans, or else at the level of “state politics, lawmaking, and constitutional principles,” as in the elites’ subversion of popular sovereignty. This is the “fundamentalist” interpretation of conservative claims of cultural oppression that liberals find so easy to dismiss. But this interpretation is ultimately a distorted articulation of something that is not so easily dismissed, the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, the disciplinary practices that have come to shape the secular, liberal self.

If conservatives will not permit themselves to be intimidated by liberal intellectualism and instead adopt an anthropological stance that treats this intellectualism as a mere cultural parochialism, this is

¹⁰² Nilüfer Göle, “The Civilizational, Spatial, and Sexual Powers of the Secular,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), pg 254.

because their deeper, instinctive “ways of knowing” apprise them of this meta-truth, which cannot be allowed to be overshadowed the ordinary truths upon which liberals rest their arguments. To the extent conservatives are anti-intellectual, this is because they follow feminism in engaging in what Anne Philips calls a “politics of presence” rather than a “politics of ideas.” Whereas the latter detaches ideas from basic human experience, the former emphasizes the interrelationship between ideas and experience in order to permit “a more exploratory notion of possibilities so far silenced.”¹⁰³ And the possibility so far silenced by liberalism is the possibility of exposing the contingency of the buffered identity. As in the feminist context, the dominant dispensation can be expected to control the very terms through which it is criticized and, to that degree, preempt or severely circumscribe the persuasiveness of those criticisms before they can get off the ground intellectually. For the naturalization of the buffered identity and the erection of entire social order on that basis cannot but leave its enemies with only a vague and inchoate sense of what might lie beyond it. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are, as Foucault says, “located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.” And this is why the ostensible issues must remain secondary, why it does not “matter greatly whether the resentment and resistance makes sense logically or is backed by solid evidence.” Lacking as they do a language for what is primary, conservative claimants of cultural oppression can only persevere in that resentment and resistance in the hope that this perseverance will eventually yield some insight into their true meaning. To accept the intellectual ground rules upon which liberals insist would be to surrender the field at the very outset, and this they refuse to do.

5. The New Class Revisited

Kahane charges that progressives have “undermined manliness, feminized your culture, elevated fretful safety and excessive caution into virtues instead of weaknesses.”¹⁰⁴ And following Lakoff, most liberals will dismiss the conservative invocation of manliness as yet another symptom of Strict Father morality, for which strong gender differentiation and masculine strength are a means of defending “Moral Order” against all that threatens it.¹⁰⁵ The Strict Father model, says Lakoff, “takes as background the view

¹⁰³ Anne Phillips, “Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas, or a Politics of Presence?,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pg. 141-42.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 17.

¹⁰⁵ George Lakoff: *The Political Mind: Why You Can’t Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (Viking, 2008), pg. 106.

that life is difficult and that the world is fundamentally dangerous.”¹⁰⁶ And liberals understand this background view as a kind of pretext for an authoritarianism that can then be proffered as a “solution” to dangers that liberals in their fretful safety and excessive caution cannot address.

However, conservatives understand manliness as an *anti*-authoritarian impulse, something that functions to disrupt rather than uphold established convention. Harvey Mansfield writes that whereas rational control “wants our lives to be bound by rules,” manliness “is dissatisfied with whatever is merely legal or conventional.” While rational control “wants peace, discounts risk, and prefers role models to heroes,” manliness “favors war, likes risk, and admires heroes,”¹⁰⁷ Manliness “seeks and welcomes drama and prefers times of war, conflict, and risk.”¹⁰⁸ It “tends to be insistent and intolerant,”¹⁰⁹ just as it is “steadfast...taking a stand, not surrendering, not allowing oneself to be determined by one’s context, not being adaptive or flexible.”¹¹⁰ Manliness must “must prove itself and do so before an audience.” It seeks “to be theatrical, welcomes drama, and wants your attention.” By contrast, rational control “prefers routine and doesn’t like getting excited” and must therefore seek to keep manliness “unemployed by means of measures that encourage or compel behavior intended to be lacking in drama.”¹¹¹

Manliness thus conceived is the *antithesis* of the buffered distance, the repudiation of its ordering impulses. The defense of manliness is at its deepest level a protest against the rationalizing forces of the modern world, against the peculiarly courtly rationality, a rationality that is hostile, not only to actual contests of swords, but also to the entire range of virtues and identities which these embodied, however they are now expressed. Rather than seeking the “new form of invulnerability” toward which the buffered distance aspires, manliness presupposes the vulnerability of the pre-modern condition, exposure to the “anti-structure” which for pre-moderns relativized and destabilized the conventional social world, revealing the precariousness of all merely human designs. Conservatives are attuned to anti-structure—the inherent flux and precariousness of all mortal things—as liberals are not, and this is why they see themselves as more manly.

This pre-modern sensibility is among the forces that animates the conservative celebration of the free-market. Conservatives have always upheld respect for property rights and been suspicious of centralized economic authority. But many conservatives’ idealization of the free market as an all-purpose

¹⁰⁶ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (The University of Chicago Press 2002), pg. 65.

¹⁰⁷ Harvey C. Mansfield, *Manliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pg. 233.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. ix.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 16.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 48.

¹¹¹ Mansfield, *Manliness*, pg. 231.

social panacea and flawless barometer of social justice seems inconsistent with many of their bedrock philosophical premises, including pragmatism, a stress on “public morality,” and respect for tradition and preference for stability. Mark Henrie writes that post-war traditionalist conservatism originated as a reaction against the “homogenization of the entire world on the basis of contract theory” and constituted an effort “to name those ‘other’ elements of the human good, which are obscured by the liberal dispensation.”¹¹² How then, should untrammelled laissez-faire have achieved its present preeminence among so many conservatives, when it is the embodiment of the contract theory to which the philosophical core of traditional conservatism is so deeply opposed? One might think that a genuine conservatism would, as Lasch suggests, support limits on economic growth and technological progress, would oppose the “ungodly ambition to acquire godlike powers over nature.”¹¹³ Yet this hubris scarcely vexes most conservatives, who see untrammelled laissez-faire as entirely consistent with their broader system of values.

One explanation is that many conservatives are really what Hofstadter called “pseudo-conservatives,” individuals who, far from embodying the traditional conservative virtues of prudence and moderation, embody an absolutistic recalcitrance against the consensus that has come to shape modern American life.¹¹⁴ But the line between conservatism and pseudo-conservatism is in fact blurrier than Hofstadter recognizes. For the mutation counter-narrative explains how this recalcitrance is compatible with the original conservative project of identifying those elements of the human good which have been suppressed by the liberal dispensation. For these elements include the chaos, unpredictability, insecurity, and therefore *spontaneity*, represented by the pre-modern condition of porous selves opened out to anti-structure. And it is these suppressed goods, manliness and the anarchic will of free men, that imbue untrammelled laissez-faire with its existential resonance for many conservatives. The market has come to represent the anti-structure suppressed by the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, man’s submersion in forces he does not control and whose unpredictable logic he cannot fathom, his openness to something that transcends his will and can upset all of his designs. As Corey Robin observes, some Cold War conservatives looked upon the Soviet Union and the welfare state as “the ultimate symbols of cold Enlightenment rationalism,” by contrast with which the free market was “the embodiment of the

¹¹² Mark C. Henrie, “Understanding Traditionalist Conservatism,” in *Varieties of Conservatism in America*, ed. Peter Berkowitz (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004), pg. 6-7.

¹¹³ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), pg. 39.

¹¹⁴

romantic counter-Enlightenment.”¹¹⁵ Conservatives’ official defense for untrammelled free markets is that they engender a more stable and more prosperous organic order by giving free reign to millions of individual decision-makers, who possess the knowledge and incentives lacked by the third-party surrogates to which the elites would transfer their prerogatives. But cosmological orientation is the reason why this defense can resonate for them as it does. It is what animates conservatives’ idealization, not only of traditional values, but also of something so historically *un*-traditional as untrammelled laissez-faire capitalism, which resonates with conservatives, not only a wise, prudent, or correct, but also as *authentic*.

Lasch observes that the concept of the New Class has enabled conservatives to attack “elites” without attacking big business.¹¹⁶ And it is the mutation counter-narrative that explains how the contraposition of the elites *versus* business can resonate more strongly for conservatives than does the elites *of* business. Whereas the elites of business are engaged in authentic exposure to anti-structure, the liberal elites of the New Class are engaged in the repudiation of anti-structure, and this is what their elitism ultimately consists in. Conservatives’ impression is that of Gouldner, who writes that the New Class demands “instinctual renunciation” of its members¹¹⁷ and that, moreover,

The culture of the New Class exacts still other costs: since its discourse emphasizes the importance of carefully edited speech, this has the vices of its virtues: in its *virtuous* aspect, self-editing implies a commendable circumspection, carefulness, self-discipline and “seriousness.” In its negative modality, however, self-editing also disposes toward an unhealthy self-consciousness, toward stilted convoluted speech, an inhibition of play, imagination and passion, and continual pressure for expressive discipline. The new rationality thus becomes the source of a new alienation.

Calling for watchfulness and self-discipline, CCD [culture of critical discourse] is productive of intellectual reflexivity *and* the loss of warmth and spontaneity. Moreover, that very reflexivity stresses the importance of adjusting action to some pattern of propriety. There is, therefore, a structured inflexibility when facing changing situations; there is a certain disregard of the differences in situations, and an insistence on hewing to the required rule.¹¹⁸

Though Lakoff and other liberals would associate discipline and renunciation with conservatives, this is as the latter see it as just another case of liberal projection. For it is the liberal New Class, not the bourgeois conservatives, which gives pride of place to the monkish virtues described by Gouldner. The New Class exists in insulated environments where manly drama is no longer necessary, where one can *afford* a “a structured inflexibility when facing changing situations,” a “certain disregard of the differences in

¹¹⁵ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford University Press 2011), pg. 133.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 512.

¹¹⁷ Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), pg. 29.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 84.

situations,” and “an insistence on hewing to the required rule.” By contrast, the “model citizen” celebrated by conservatives achieves his capitalistic success through his manly willingness to overcome a situation that is not of his own making, his perspicacious attention to the concrete and unprecedented, and his preparedness to throw out all the old rules in pursuit of his vision. Lakoff holds that the conservative “model citizen” is admired for his reverence before the established order. But the idealized capitalist is admired by conservatives for his *irreverence*, as the type who seizes on an idea that others disdain and then realize the profit that would vindicate his irreverence. There is no analogue in the non-profit sector that could vindicate the individual against the “patterns of propriety” at home in New Class milieus, where “watchfulness and discipline” are the order of the day. The corporate employee whose ideas are rebuffed by his employer can in theory strike out on his own and prove him wrong. But no such recourse is available to the aspiring English professor whose ideas will not be accredited as lying in the “mainstream” by the literary deconstructionists who sit atop Bourdieu’s “intellectual magistrature of the sacred college of masters.” Being insulated from the market and its shifting consumer preferences, the social world of the liberal elites is not embedded in a surrounding anti-structure that can from time to time relativize it as a merely human construct, and this insulation is what renders that world repugnant to many conservatives. Here again, conservative claims of cultural oppression are the logical outcome of how a more pre-modern consciousness must process a more modern one, the recapitulation in modern terms of the pre-modern’s resistance to the modern.

Conservatives’ reservations about educational meritocracy, their disposition to elevate the entrepreneur above the recipients of prestigious diplomas, awards, and posts, reflects, not raw anti-intellectualism, as liberals believe, but the perception that meritocracy implies the inauthentic repudiation of anti-structure to which conservatives are prepared to expose themselves, and that this repudiation is the origin of liberals’ surreptitious authoritarianism and parochialism. Meritocracy, notes Mansfield, presupposes that virtue has been understood “in conventional ways so that it can be recognized and scored by those in authority.”¹¹⁹ Meritocrats expect that “their merit should be recognized and promoted through an educational system that does the manly job of self-assertion for them by giving them honors they do not have to claim or fight for.”¹²⁰ The liberal elites see this pacification as a kind of social and intellectual achievement, the overcoming of conflict through reason. But conservatives see it as the alienation of something that is essential to our humanity. They agree with Lasch’s that “[i]n their drive to insulate themselves against risk and contingency—against the unpredictable hazards that afflict

¹¹⁹ Mansfield, *Manliness*, pg. 56.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 232.

human life—the thinking classes have seceded not just from the common world around them but from reality itself.”¹²¹ Whereas liberals conceptualize this secession in epistemic terms, as an enlightened ascent to a broader perspective, conservative claims of cultural oppression conceptualize the secession in terms of the overall human make-up, at the level of nonexplicit engagement with the world, as an attempt to insulate liberalism’s ordering impulses from the squalor and coarseness that lies without. What George Will condemns as liberal condescension toward “masses making messes” and Goldberg condemns as the New Dealers’ “contempt for the ‘disorganized’ character of capitalism”¹²² are the economic expression of the buffered identity’s ordering impulses, which the ordinary American naturally resents. And this is why he will rail against the liberal elites in disregard of his economic self-interest. Liberals conceptualize the struggle between the bourgeois and the intellectual through the subtraction account, as a conflict between narrow self-interest and moral universalism, or between parochial prejudice and critical reflexivity. But conservatives conceptualize it through the mutation counter-narrative, as a conflict between those who are opened out to an anti-structure that relativizes and destabilizes the merely conventional human order and those who, sealing themselves off from that anti-structure, lack the humility that this openness would have normally inculcated. The elitism of the liberal elites may get articulated intellectually, but it first and foremost transpires at the level of cosmological orientation.

Hofstadter writes that modern intellectuals are the legacies of the aristocrat and the priest. Having inherited the leisurely playfulness of the former and the truth-seeking piety of the latter, they have also inherited the egalitarian animus which these qualities have historically provoked.¹²³ But where liberals see intellectual freedom and truth-seeking, conservative claimants of cultural oppression must, as the pre-modern outsiders looking in, perceive the peculiarly courtly rationality. Hence Kahane’s accusation that liberals can “[a]t a drop of a Rolodex...come with a rotating hit squad of well-placed academics ready to pounce and opine upon just about anything having to do with you.” Its “people are trained practically from birth as an instant-response team, the weaklings and the physical cowards who sought the safety of a sinecure instead of the mortal combat of life but who still get the thrill of shooting inarticulate fish in a barrel.”¹²⁴ Liberals will dismiss this as an empty ad hominem, as an obscure and ill-directed grievance and frustration. But what is the “sinecure” enjoyed by liberal academics but a contemporary iteration of the royal pension that an absolutist monarch might have deigned to bestow upon courtly supplicants, emasculated warriors-turned-courtiers? And if these academics find themselves

¹²¹ Lasch, *The Revolt of the the Elites*, pg. 20.

¹²² Goldberg, *Tyranny of Cliches*, pg. 54.

¹²³ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, pg. 32.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 182.

competent to discredit conservative claims of cultural oppression as easily as one “shoot[s] inarticulate fish in a barrel,” do they not owe their superior eloquence to the conditions that first generated it? These conditions are the rituals of courtly supplication and manipulation that, as Elias says, came to constitute “the basic stock of models of conduct” that gradually spread “to ever-wider circles of functions”—including those that can be found on the liberal Rolodex. The elitism of which conservatives accuse liberals is simply the anthropomorphization of the forces that brought the buffered identity into being. As an expression of conservatives’ subjugated knowledge, it is a symbol of the specific social conditions out of which emerged what would later become naturalized as liberated human nature.

Of course, conservatives’ idealized entrepreneur must operate within a thoroughly rationalized order that in truth makes few allowances for the anarchic will of free men. His is not the capitalism of the far-flung and physically dangerous whaling expeditions extolled by Kahane. As Lasch observes, the Right takes no heed of the forces that have transformed capitalism since the days of Adam Smith, refusing to recognize the corporate centralization and bureaucratization that are inimical to what they defend as capitalism’s virtues.¹²⁵ And so conservatives would seem to be just as compromised by unmanliness as the liberal elites with whom they would prefer to associate it. But here as elsewhere, conservative claims of cultural oppression are significant, not as descriptions of empirical reality, but as symbolic expressions of the “sedimentation of the past in the present.” In being subjected to the vagaries of an often unpredictable market, the entrepreneur or potential entrepreneur can at least be understood (and idealized) as exposed to some modicum of anti-structure, however vestigial and emaciated it may be by comparison with the pre-modern original it symbolizes—what Elias describes as “the incurable unrest, the perpetual proximity of danger, the whole atmosphere of this unpredictable and insecure life.” The sharp lines that freedom-loving “ornery Americans” would draw between themselves and the liberal elites might seem without real-world foundation. But the “liberal elites” are merely the symbolic mediums through which the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity are protested, caricatures through opposition to which what they discipline and repress may be once again expressed, however imperfectly.

The “real world” foundations of conservative claims of cultural oppression lie in the *inner* world of the modern liberal identity. To the extent liberals are seen as effete and unmanly, this is in reflection of the affect-subduing character of the civilizing process. To the extent they are, on the other hand, ruthless bullies who have erected what Ben Shapiro calls a “culture of fear and intimidation” that cows even red-blooded, beef-eating conservatives into silence and submission, this is testimony to the fact that

¹²⁵ Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, pg. 519.

the civilizing process now penetrates the very organism of those who oppose it—as Elias says, “retrain[ing] instinctual and affective impulses denied direct access to the motor apparatus,” becoming “an automatism, a self-compulsion” that the individual “cannot resist even if he consciously wishes to.” Conservative claimants of cultural oppression can be intimidated by the liberalism that lies without because they are already subject to the liberalism that lies within, which they then project onto flesh-and-blood liberals. This is why there can be a culture war notwithstanding the fact that liberals and claimants are not, as the latter sometimes suggest, divided by radically different lifestyles. For they are separated, not by what is outwardly *expressed* in their lifestyles, but by what is inwardly *repressed* by the buffered identity, by the degree to which they are constitutionally recalcitrant to that identity. To the extent that conservative claimants of cultural oppression may be said to pursue a lifestyle radically incongruous with liberalism, this lifestyle consists in the claiming of cultural oppression itself, which is a direct reflection of that inward repression.

* * *

The “ordering impulses” of the liberal elites are hardly restricted to the economic sphere, where they express themselves in hostility to the free-market, and rather extend to every sphere of life, where they again and again make a target of the essential conservatism or the ordinary American, leaving the latter deracinated for his authentic roots and helpless to resist the encroachments of the liberal culture. Ingraham warns that “[p]arents would be disturbed to know that it is common practice among pediatricians these days to tell the moms and dads to leave the room so the ‘professional’ can have private chats with children—chats that involve controversial topics like abortion, premarital sex, masturbation, and birth control.” The basic presumption, whether at work in doctor’s offices, schools, or government, is that the “‘experts’ know best” and that “[p]arents are too ignorant, too ‘traditional,’ and too incompetent to be left ‘unsupervised’ to direct the lives of their own children.”¹²⁶ Though conservative claims of cultural oppression are often seen as concerned solely with the defense of traditionalism against the secular modernism of the elites, this struggle is intertwined with another one centered on defending individual self-reliance and common sense against the claims of expertise and professionalism. The rise of the “cognitive elites,” says Harris, betrays America’s original self-understanding as “the promised land of common sense,” undermining the spirit of “cognitive egalitarianism” which it was once assumed “would keep the common people from being manipulated by intellectual charlatans of every ilk.”¹²⁷ For

¹²⁶ Laura Ingraham, *Power to the People* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2007), pg.42.

¹²⁷ Harris, *Next American Civil War*, pg. 71.

the liberal elites have now assumed this role, deploying their claims to expertise and professionalism to manipulate and intimidate ordinary Americans into submitting to the liberal culture. Conservatives oppose, not only the specifically left-wing cultural priorities of the anointed, but also their more general assault on cognitive egalitarianism, on the ordinary American's general life-competence and decision-making capacities, which are understood to be the psychological bulwark of conservatism. Since secularism and modernism operate in the service of this assault, religion and tradition are celebrated, not only for their intrinsic value, but as the common man's defense against this assault, the foundations of a cognitive egalitarianism that can alone ensure his continued independence and self-sufficiency.

Hofstadter writes that "it is the historic glory of the intellectual class of the West in modern times that, of all the classes which could be called in any sense privileged, it has shown the largest and most consistent concern for the well-being of the classes which lie below it in the social scale."¹²⁸ But as conservatives see it, this consistent concern reflects the fact that intellectuals' hierarchical impulses are invested in *influence* rather than acquisition. Hardly selfless servants of the public good, liberal intellectuals carry forth what Taylor describes as the characteristic ambition of modern elites to "make over the whole society, to change the lives of the mass of people, and make them conform better to certain models which carried strong conviction among these elites." Like the elites of yesteryear, today's liberals believe that the lower orders are not to be "left as they are, but badgered, bullied, pushed, preached at, drilled, and organized to abandon their lax and disordered folkways." This is why intellectuals are so invested in the fortunes of those they deem to be in some fashion or other "underprivileged." That the badgering is now effectuated through the well-meaning solicitude of the family doctor rather than the stern injunctions of the village priest or constable does not alter the fundamental nature of the project. For this solicitude is but the latest iteration of the civilizing process, merely a sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized version of an ambition that was formerly carried out more brutally and openly.

Christina Hoff Sommers argues that our culture's contemporary "therapism" emerged with the waning of traditional religion¹²⁹ and is premised on the proposition that "vulnerability, rather than strength, characterizes the American psyche...and that a diffident, anguished and emotionally apprehensive public requires a vast array of therapists, self-esteem educators, grief counselors, workshopers, healers, and traumatologists to lead it through the trials of everyday life."¹³⁰ Enfeebling the objects of its compassion, therapism is an assault against the "American Creed" and its paramount

¹²⁸ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, pg. 29.

¹²⁹ Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel, M.D., *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture is Eroding Self-Reliance*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2005), pg. 216.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 5.

virtues of self-reliance, stoicism, and courage, gradually sliding the nation into a permanent regime of “therapeutic self-absorption and moral debility.”¹³¹ Therapism seeks to “professionalize” normal human distress,¹³² to appropriate common sense as its own special province¹³³ in order to persuade the public that it requires specialized assistance to cope with normal human experience.¹³⁴

Strict Father morality ostensibly concerns itself with “Moral Order” while Nurturant Parent morality ostensibly concerns itself with the concrete individuality of persons. But Nurturant Parent morality is no less of an “imposition” than Strict Father morality, because it must *create* the kind of individuality that would be receptive to its nurturance—a “diffident, anguished, and emotionally apprehensive public.” Liberals’ altruism cannot be taken at face value because it is premised on just this kind of imperiousness, which is always concealed underneath the surface of their good intentions. Conservative claimants of cultural oppression see symmetry where liberals see asymmetry because they intuitively recognize that the kind of individuality on whose basis liberals can claim moral and cognitive superiority is no less a contingent social construction than their own “Moral Order.” It is the product of the buffered distance and its demand for ever-greater individual self-reflexivity in the context of ever-greater social interdependency, which is now being promoted through therapism—whose imperiousness may be concealed from its practitioners and their “clients” alike. Strict Father morality may lack the ostensible humanistic appeal of Nurturant Parent morality, but this is merely because it has become the bogeyman through which liberals attempt to discredit as reactionary authoritarianism whatever would resist their “nurturance,” a nurturance whose purpose is to suppress manliness, the anarchic will of free men, and exposure to anti-structure—all anathema to the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity.

This hostility to anti-structure is why Lasch can condemn the tunnel-vision of the original reformers of education, like Horace Mann. The reformers had hoped that a professionalized educational system would substitute for the frontier as a new engine of opportunity.¹³⁵ But their very professionalism involved a “distrust of pedagogically unmediated experience” such as was acquired in the streets or through ordinary conversation.¹³⁶ And conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe that this kind of distrust is a characteristic feature of the liberal culture generally, which has a vested identitarian

¹³¹ Ibid., pg. 218.

¹³² Ibid., pg. 183.

¹³³ Ibid., pg. 187.

¹³⁴ Ibid., pg. 131.

¹³⁵ Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, pg. 75.

¹³⁶ Ibid., pg. 150-51.

interest in artificially devaluing the kind of everyday, informal knowledge over which liberals do not exercise control. F. Carolyn Graglia alleges that family professionals have sought to relegate parents to the status of “rank amateurs,” invoking “knowledge, technique, and the processing of information” to discredit the unconscious, intuitive self-assurance upon which the mother and housewife has traditionally drawn.¹³⁷ And in a similar vein, Sowell complains that intellectuals who are eager to mitigate criminal responsibility on the basis of traumatic childhoods and other unchosen adversity “are seldom receptive to claims that policemen who had a split second to make a life-and-death shooting decision, at the risk of their own lives, should be cut some slack.”¹³⁸

The ideological divide is thus not only between an “enlightened” understanding of crime and traditionalistic retributivism, but also between a disengaged social scientific stance that correlates adverse socio-economic conditions with criminality and the engaged, “pedagogically unmediated” experience of the cop on the beat, which produces a kind of wisdom and insight that is unavailable from within the disengaged social scientific stance. Split-second, life-and-death judgments cannot be “scored by those with authority” as can peer reviewed articles addressing the socio-economic determinants of crime. And so they cannot be accredited as genuine knowledge by the elites, who seek to disable and discredit conservatives’ capacity to act on their pedagogically unmediated experience. In this vein, Himmelfarb laments that Christian outreach groups with highly effective substance-abuse treatment programs risk being shut down by the government because their employees, successfully recovered addicts themselves, are not credentialed with the proper academic degrees.¹³⁹ Though many today celebrate the paid professional as immeasurably more competent than the volunteer amateur, the now discredited Victorians from whom we have much to learn took the opposite view, regarding the amateur as more dedicated and public spirited, more competent to address the specific needs of the poor,¹⁴⁰ and frowned upon the professional social engineer as officious and presumptuous.¹⁴¹ But this insight is lost on the liberal elite who, seeing the world through the prism of their ordering impulses, cannot recognize what Burke called “wisdom without reflection,” the rich intuitive wisdom that has been built into the ordinary American’s basic identity, the inheritance of the noble history that created that identity.

¹³⁷ F. Carolyn Graglia, *Domestic Tranquility: A Brief Against Feminism* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1998), pg. 47-53.

¹³⁸ Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), pg. 175.

¹³⁹ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures: A Searching Examination of American Society in the Aftermath of Our Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), pg. 109.

¹⁴⁰ Himmelfarb, *De-Moralization of Society*, pg. 164.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 171.

Conservatives understand this suppression to be all-pervasive. Questioning whether the post-war professionalization of education, business, and journalism was genuinely necessary given the subject matter, Gelernter writes in his *America-Lite* that universities naturally had an interest in “convert[ing] as much of the landscape as possible into fenced-off, neatly tended, carefully patrolled academic preserves,”¹⁴² so that the “smooth, manicured green lawn of science” might replace the “wild sweet meadow-grass of common sense.”¹⁴³ Justified or not, this trend toward professionalization does not strike liberals as essentially political. If conservatives by contrast can suspect it as one more liberal usurpation, this is because they interpret the trend through the lens of the mutation counter-narrative. Liberal expertise is just another expression of liberalism’s ordering impulses and monkish virtues, the artificial devaluation of knowledge borne of encounters with anti-structure—the “wild sweet meadow-grass of common sense”—and a corresponding overvaluation of such knowledge that, shielded from that anti-structure, can be “scored by those with authority.” To maintain their dominion, liberals must discredit the kind of knowledge that attaches to “embodied feeling” and its “nonexplicit engagement with the world” as a set of mindless habits and reflexes, lax and disorganized folkways to be uprooted. Academic specialization can assume a political dimension because it abets this general project, whose political upshot is always the continued dominion of the liberal culture and the specific identity it seeks to instill.

Whether it be through the admonitions of the family doctor, the solicitude of therapists, the decisions of credentialing agencies, or the disciplinary specialization of universities, the basic message is that ordinary Americans must be supervised by liberals, who are acting in their capacity as liberals even as they profess to be only committed professionals just trying to get the job done. The distrust of pedagogically unmediated experience is, like every other feature of New Class sectarianism, part of an all-versatile toolkit of intimidation through which liberals seek to discredit the intuitive wisdom and common sense of the ordinary American and thereby enforce what Gouldner calls the New Class’s “new hierarchy of the knowing, the knowledgeable, the reflexive and insightful.” Those who readily submit to the liberal Guardian class are celebrated as worldly, sophisticated, and “aware” while those who resist it are castigated as primitive and reactionary, individuals too fearful and benighted to successfully navigate through a complex modern society. In this way do liberals instill the habits of deference and self-doubt needed to keep the lower orders in their place.

With their fixation on the economic, the liberal elites simply cannot process the existence of this kind of inequality. As Lasch observes,

¹⁴² Gelernter, *America Lite*, pg. 82.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pg. 86.

In our own time money has come to be regarded as the only reliable measure of equality, and we therefore find it difficult to credit nineteenth-century impressions of America as an egalitarian society. But such impressions derived not merely from the distribution of wealth or economic opportunity but, above all, from the distribution of intelligence and competence. Citizenship appears to have given even the humbler members of society access to knowledge and cultivation elsewhere reserved for the privileged classes. Opportunity, as many Americans understood it, was a matter more of intellectual than of material enrichment. It was their restless curiosity, their skeptical and iconoclastic turn of mind, their resourcefulness and self-reliance, their capacity for invention and improvisation that most dramatically seemed to differentiate the laboring classes in America from their European counterparts.¹⁴⁴

If the everyday Americans of the Nineteenth Century were distinguished from their European counterparts by these virtues, then conservative claims of cultural oppression constitute a protest against a state of affairs wherein these are no longer available in their more primordial “enfleshed” form—having been, just like religion, excarnated and intellectualized in a way that eviscerates them of their original spirit. This is nothing for which any individual liberal is personally responsible, of course. But the ostensible issues are always secondary, as Harris says, and individual liberals are merely the complicit mediums through which a broader, all-pervasive liberal culture is being imposed upon unwilling others. This is what the critical theory of the Right above all seeks to expose. Catherine MacKinnon writes:

Men’s physiology defines most sports, their needs define auto and health insurance coverage, their socially designed biographies define workplace expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit, their objectification of life define art, their military service defines citizenship, their presence defines family, their inability to get along with each other—their wars and rulerships—defines history, their image defines god, and their genitals define sex.¹⁴⁵

The Right has become the Left in order to accuse the Left of having become the Right because, just as MacKinnon refuses to equate the male with the human as such, so conservative claimants of cultural oppression are animated by the visceral conviction that the modern liberal identity is as Taylor says “one historically constructed understanding of agency among others”—and not essential liberated human nature. If patriarchy has distortively naturalized and universalized maleness, then liberalism has distortively naturalized and universalized the buffered identity and its ordering impulses. This is why conservatives can entertain the same kind of all-encompassing suspiciousness as feminists like MacKinnon. Whatever their particular arguments, they viscerally intuit that the buffered identity and its ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity inflect a wide range of ideals in accordance with culturally parochial imperatives that have been misidentified with essential human nature, structuring the

¹⁴⁴ Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, pg. 59.

¹⁴⁵ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), pg. 36.

rhythms of everyday life in accordance with a very specific ethos. Expertise and professionalism will be defended as responses to the complexities of modern life. But conservative claimants of cultural oppression believe that much of this complexity was created by liberals and for liberals, who are always looking for new ways to posit the buffered distance against a “barbarian past” of “less fortunate peoples”—a role now assumed by conservatives.

But conservatives understand this forward-looking universalism as just an ideological tool operating in the service of distinctively liberal interests. While the buffered identity sets itself in opposition to lax and disorganized folkways of the unwashed masses, it itself a folkways of sorts. It is not an abstract commitment to unencumbered human desire—a neutral, power-free space as Gole says—but a particular way of being, a particular form of “nonexplicit engagement with the world” that is not acknowledged in liberalism’s official self-conception. Liberalism is not the transcendence of all hero-systems, but merely the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of that transcendence. Liberals believe that they offer only hard-nosed critiques of anachronistic prejudices. But conservatives suspect, with Gouldner, that “the negativity of intellectuals embodies a disguised set of claims advancing their own candidacy as a new elite” and that this negativity is therefore but “the opening move in the replacement of the old by a new class, and of an old tradition and hierarchy by a new one.”¹⁴⁶ Irreducible to bare critique—as in “reservations about past and present policies”—the negativity of intellectuals is also the expression of a particular hero-system, a particular ideal of the overall human make-up, the buffered self. *This is the liberal elites’ “disguised set of claims,”* which is usually disguised for the elites themselves, who can therefore see nothing beyond their good intentions.

6. Personal Tastes and Pretensions

It is often said that political discourse in America is now plagued by ever-increasing incivility, by an alarming unwillingness to approach opposing views’ with any modicum of open-mindedness and a correlative indulgence in ad hominem rhetoric. This, it is held, is a destructive trend that, in impeding our ability to intelligently debate “the real issues,” poses a danger to the health of democracy itself. Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson lament that “citizens do not reason together so much as they reason against one another” when they “reflexively attack persons instead of policies, looking for what is behind policies rather than what is in them.”¹⁴⁷ The theoretical irrelevance of ad hominem attacks is axiomatic

¹⁴⁶ Gouldner, *Rise of the Intellectuals*, pg. 32-33.

¹⁴⁷ Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pg. 360.

among sophisticated thinkers. But on another level, what may seem like raw incivility constitutes a special kind of lucidity into the existentially deepest stakes of the debate. The ad hominem of conservatives are attempts to impugn, not the surreptitiously ignoble motivations of liberals, but the basic categories through which liberals make sense of themselves. Beyond imputing generic vices like arrogance to liberals, these attacks seek to describe a *particular identity* which liberals cannot recognize as such. The trope of the emaciated, pointy-headed intellectual is indeed a caricature. But it is a caricature that expresses conservatives' sense that liberals are oblivious to the buffered identity *as* an identity, and therefore to the fact that liberalism imposes what is a *particular way of being* on unwilling others. This is what lies "behind" policies rather than "in" them, and what conservative claims of cultural oppression endeavor to bring to the forefront.

Nunberg notes that while "[David] Brooks writes entertainingly and caustically about the lifestyle of the inhabitants of urban liberal enclaves whom he calls Bobos...a deft satirist could find equally easy pickings in the political and cultural pretensions of any number of conservative sets" like "shallow upper-class WASPs" or "preternaturally clean-cut summer interns at right-wing think tanks."¹⁴⁸ Nunberg is surely correct that the political and cultural pretensions of conservatives would be easy pickings. But if liberal satirists nevertheless do not fixate upon the pretensions of conservatives with the same intense interest that conservatives display in those of liberals, this is because the cultural prestige of the subtraction account and the buffered distance has *already* rendered conservative pretensions salient *qua* pretensions, while encouraging us to conceive of their liberal counterparts, not *as* pretensions, but as the unvarnished lucidity which naturally emerges upon the supersession of conservative mindsets. Nunberg in fact understates his case, because the conservative "pickings" are for this reason much *easier*.

It could not be otherwise, given that conservatives' cultural pretensions are acknowledged in their own celebrations of traditional values. Lamenting the gender integration of the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) mandated by the Supreme Court in *United States v. Virginia*, Justice Scalia concluded his dissent by remarking that it was "powerfully impressive" that a public institution would require all first-year students to keep VMI's "The Code of the Gentlemen" on their person. The Code, part of which Justice Scalia includes in his opinion, specifies that "Without a strict observance of the fundamental Code of Honor, no man, no matter how 'polished,' can be considered a gentleman. The honor of a gentleman demands the inviolability of his word, and the incorruptibility of his principles. He is the descendant of the knight, the

¹⁴⁸ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 68.

crusader; he is the defender of the defenseless and the champion of justice...or he is not a Gentleman."

A Gentleman, the Code explains,

"Does not discuss his family affairs in public or with acquaintances.

"Does not speak more than casually about his girl friend.

"Does not go to a lady's house if he is affected by alcohol. He is temperate in the use of alcohol.

"Does not lose his temper; nor exhibit anger, fear, hate, embarrassment, ardor or hilarity in public.

"Does not hail a lady from a club window.

"A gentleman never discusses the merits or demerits of a lady.

"Does not mention names exactly as he avoids the mention of what things cost.

"Does not borrow money from a friend, except in dire need. Money borrowed is a debt of honor, and must be repaid as promptly as possible. Debts incurred by a deceased parent, brother, sister or grown child are assumed by honorable men as a debt of honor.

"Does not display his wealth, money or possessions.

"Does not put his manners on and off, whether in the club or in a ballroom. He treats people with courtesy, no matter what their social position may be.

"Does not slap strangers on the back nor so much as lay a finger on a lady.

"Does not 'lick the boots of those above' nor 'kick the face of those below him on the social ladder.

"Does not take advantage of another's helplessness or ignorance and assumes that no gentleman will take advantage of him.

"A Gentleman respects the reserves of others, but demands that others respect those which are his.

"A Gentleman can become what he wills to be"¹⁴⁹

Liberals will find this less "powerfully impressive" than did Justice Scalia. And one important reason is that honor is, as Peter Berger observes, as little respected in contemporary culture, and especially among intellectuals, as is chastity. Honor and chastity are both atavisms in a modern society, at best regarded "as ideological leftovers in the consciousness of obsolete classes, such as military officers or ethnic grandmothers."¹⁵⁰ Whereas insult to honor was one judged to be a serious social, and possibly legal, offense, someone who now sought to defend his honor will be judged neurotic, abnormally sensitive, or hopelessly provincial.¹⁵¹ These judgments are now the received wisdom. And this is what permits liberals to dismiss "traditional values" as so much empty bluster, the product of emotional conflict and intellectual conflict.

The Gentleman's folly is the folly of Don Quixote, who begins his quest as a proud knight but ends it by recognizing that he is just a naked man in bed. Berger writes:

The true self of the knight is revealed as he rides out to do battle in the full regalia of his role; by comparison, the naked man in bed with a woman represents a lesser reality of the self. In a world of dignity, in the modern sense, the social symbolism governing the interaction of men is a disguise. The escutcheons *hide* the true self. It is precisely the naked man, and even more specifically the naked man expressing his sexuality, who represents himself more truthfully. Consequently, the understanding of self-discovery and self-mystification is reversed as between these two worlds. In

¹⁴⁹ *United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 603 (U.S. 1996) (Scalia, J., dissenting).

¹⁵⁰ Berger, Berger, and Kellner, *Homeless Mind*, pg. 83.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 84.

a world of honor, the individual discovers his true identity in his roles, and to turn away from the roles is to turn away from himself—in “false consciousness,” one is tempted to add. In a world of dignity, the individual can only discover his true identity by emancipating himself from his socially imposed roles—the latter are only masks, entangling him in illusion, “alienation” and “bad faith.”¹⁵²

The problem for the conservative is that he still clings to a world of honor, whether this be through the Code of the Gentleman, the preternaturally clean-cut look of conservative think tank interns, the patriotism of Sarah Palin rally attendees, or any number of other ways. And this is the ultimate source of liberal animus. The liberal’s reaction to the Gentleman will be informed not primarily by what he does or believes, but by what he *is*. The Gentleman’s original sin is not his chauvinism or classism, but the structure of consciousness that facilitates these qualities, his indisposition toward the disengagement that would compel him to *see through* his sense of honor, to see through his hero-system. The Gentleman is in the midst of what Sartre calls the “spirit of seriousness.” Simone de Beauvoir explains:

[The serious man] stubbornly engulfs his transcendence in the object which bars the horizon and bolts the sky. The rest of the world is a faceless desert. Here again one sees how such a choice is immediately confirmed. If there is being only, for example, in the form of the Army, how could the military man wish for anything else than to multiply barracks and maneuvers? No appeal arises from the abandoned zones where nothing can be reaped because nothing has been sown.¹⁵³

The man of seriousness is serious because he refuses to recognize the meanings which he projects upon the world *as* projections. Confounding the objective world with the human meaning with which he has laden it, he disingenuously treats values as what Sartre calls “transcendent givens independent of human subjectivity.”¹⁵⁴ The spirit of seriousness is a refusal to recognize one’s hero-system *as* a hero-system and to see oneself as the origin of that hero-system. The man of seriousness hides his own agency from himself, in order to escape the anguished recognition of his own freedom. Seen from this perspective, what the Gentleman holds out as his steely conviction and unwavering determination is in fact his teleological libertinism, merely his passivity before meanings for which he will not assume responsibility. The man of seriousness, writes Sartre, “makes himself such that he is waited for by all the tasks placed along the way,” responding to these tasks as “mute demands” and experiencing himself as “the passive obedience to these demands.”¹⁵⁵ The imperatives of the Code, however lofty, are just such tasks, mute

¹⁵² Berger, Berger, and Kellner, *Homeless Mind*, pg. 90-91.

¹⁵³ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1997), p. 51.

¹⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), pg. 796.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 796.

demands by means of which the Gentleman perseveres in a trance that sacrifices true individuality on the altar of identity.

Conservatives are culturally oppressed because they live under the cloud of such judgments. And they respond in kind, by recasting what liberals uphold as courage and critical intelligence as a set of inherited cultural dispositions that are no less reflexive and unthinking, no less heteronomous, than their own have been judged to be. That is, they seek to expose the “education gap” as an “indoctrination gap,” to show that, far from representing an unvarnished lucidity that remains upon the discarding of confining horizons or illusions, the liberal’s repudiations of honor and tradition are a trance in their own right. While they may be social credentialed as “sophisticated,” liberal attitudes are no less than the Code of the Gentleman a form of “passive obedience” to “mute demands.” The naked man in bed expressing his sexuality is no more lucid than the knight because that nakedness—i.e., the ordinary human desire that the subtraction account casts as the bare remainder of discarding antiquated religious and metaphysical illusions—is in reality a hero-system, and not the transcendence of all hero-systems.

* * *

This is the implicit upshot of Brooks’ caustic wit, already examined in Chapter 3, the function of which is to communicate that the buffered distance cannot be accepted at face value as the realization of some abstract, value-free, culturally-contentless ideal of individual autonomy. The Bobo ethos is not just the byproduct of having sloughing off the various illusions of the past, but rather a spiritual vision and hero-system that is surreptitiously symmetrical to the moralism and religiosity of conservatives. Hence the Bobos’ crypto-conservatism. Brooks writes:

The Bobos take a utilitarian view of pleasure. Any sensual pleasure that can be edifying or life-enhancing is celebrated. On the other hand, any pleasure that is counterproductive or dangerous is judged harshly. So exercise is celebrated, but smoking is now considered a worse sin than at least 5 of the 10 commandments. Coffee becomes the beverage of the age because it stimulates mental acuity, while booze is out of favor because it dulls the judgment. You can go to the beach near naked in a skimpy bathing suit and that is normal, but if you neglect to put on sun block to protect against skin cancer, people are astonished. It is admirable to eat healthy, but we use the word *guilt* more often in connection with unhealthy foods—high fat, high sodium, or high calorie—than in any other context. Contemplative pleasures, like taking a long bath are admired, but dangerous pleasures like speeding on a motorcycle are disdained, and driving without a seatbelt is positively immoral. Sports that are aerobic, like cross-country skiing and Rollerblading, thrive, while sports that do little to improve cardiovascular health, like pool, bowling, and Ping-Pong, are low class.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: the New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pg. 199.

Viewed superficially, the Bobos are merely enlightened hedonists who both enjoy the pleasures of the moment and also take measures to extend those pleasures into the long-term future. And yet they are also rather moralistic and judgmental, establishing a social hierarchy on the basis of that enlightened hedonism. Charles Murray observes:

The culture of the new upper class carries with it an unmistakable whiff of a “we’re better than the rabble” mentality. The daily yoga and jogging that keep them whipper-thin are not just healthy things for them to do; people who are overweight are less admirable as people. Deciding not to recycle does not reflect just an alternative opinion about whether recycling makes sense; it is inherently irresponsible. Smokers are not to be worried about, but to be held in contempt.¹⁵⁷

This contempt is not gratuitous snobbery in the context of the mutation counter-narrative. As we saw, the buffered distance secularizes the spiritual significance that the movement of religious Reform had already transferred from the lived experience of the sacred to the disciplining of the individual will in the service of social order and prosperity. And the Bobos ethos is this spiritual significance secularized, liberalized, and taken to its logical conclusion. Hence the Bobos’ curious combination of moralism and naturalism. Just like liberalism generally, naturalism developed not from any mere subtraction of “certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge,” but as part of the buffered distance, which *moralizes* naturalism as an affirmation of a particular hero-system, the disengaged strategic agent who knows how to represent the world accurately and act within it rationally. This is why “smoking is now considered a worse sin than at least 5 of the 10 commandments” and why “driving without a seatbelt is positively immoral.” Bobo utilitarianism is an *assertion of virtue*. For the Bobos understand themselves as *contributors* to a broader order, the “order of mutual benefit.” And it is precisely this broader order that is being flouted by smokers, the overweight, and ping pong players. The recklessness of driving without a seatbelt is a violation, not only of one’s rational self-interest, but of the broader civilizational ideals from which self-interest derives its meaning. Sunk in their quasi-medieval squalor and coarseness, these people are all oblivious to the extended chains of social interdependence that constitute the order of mutual benefit, hindering that order by clinging to their lax and disorganized folkways—now overcome by the Bobo dispensation. While the Bobos see themselves as driven by individual enlightenment, this enlightenment is the product of the uniformization, homogenization, and rationalization of buffered distance.

The Bobos’ regimes of “rigorous exercise, self-disciplined eating, getting a full night’s sleep, and leading a careful, productive life” are, Brooks writes, “ways to encourage moral behavior through the backdoor.” Those “who follow them are leading lives of disciplined self-restraint,” albeit “in the name of

¹⁵⁷ Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012), pg. 84.

their bodies instead of their souls.”¹⁵⁸ But it is only on the basis of a subtraction account that this “backdoor” *could have come to qualify* as a backdoor—that is, as something unacknowledged and surreptitious. Seen in the context of the mutation counter-narrative, that “backdoor” is the compression of the spiritual and the secular into a new whole, the process whereby the moral and spiritual valences that formerly attached to the soul become secularized, compressed into our physicality. That is why the Bobos are indeed the “New Victorians,” the beneficiaries and heirs, rather than the antipodes, of the original Victorians whom they have the luxury of disdaining as backwards and benighted.

Himmelfarb complains that Victorian “virtue” carried a sense of gravity that our own “values” do not.¹⁵⁹ Hence the Victorians’ attention to the “small morals” of life, like table manners, conversational etiquette, and proper appearance, which served as concrete reminders of their broader ideals.¹⁶⁰ But Brooks exposes that the Bobos have their own “small morals.” Hence the driver in the “Latte Town” of Burlington, Vermont who stood at the intersection patiently waiting for Brooks to complete his daydreaming and cross the street, on the premise that behind the wheel of a car he was ethically inferior to a pedestrian, even a dithering one.¹⁶¹ The Bobos think themselves too enlightened for old-fashioned as virtue—as opposed to, say, the morality of equal respect. However, the real difference is that, with the spiritual and the secular being more thoroughly *compressed* for the Bobos than they were for the Victorians, their virtue is just more thoroughly embedded in a pragmatic, secular agenda—like environmentalism in the case of Brooks’s endlessly forbearing Burlington motorist. But this only disguises without eliminating the moralistic seriousness that attaches to such commitments. This is why conservatives see symmetry where liberals see symmetry. If they are not impressed by environmentalist virtue, this is because they see it through the lens of the mutation counter-narrative and conclude that this Burlington driver’s supposedly higher “social consciousness” is merely the ideological rationalization for his subordination to the more extended chains of social interdependency of the buffered distance. The Bobo may see himself as having achieved a special unvarnished naturalistic lucidity. But he is in fact beholden to a hero-system premised on the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, and so no more “enlightened” than the conservatives who consume gasoline quite guiltlessly.

Once again perceiving symmetry where liberals perceive symmetry, Brooks observes that under the Bobos even a counter-cultural activity like S&M has been “codified in rules and etiquette.” Though these codes “may not be the same as the etiquette that governed behavior in a 19th-century parlor,...in

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pg. 216.

¹⁵⁹ Himmelfarb, *De-Moralization of Society*, pg. 11-12.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pg. 22

¹⁶¹ Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, pg. 103.

their relentless demands on self-control, they weirdly mimic those social codes.”¹⁶² But that mimicry ceases to be puzzling once we reject subtraction account and recognize the sedimentation of the past in the present, recognize the religio-moral origins of what we now mistake for a culturally neutral individualism. The Bobos understand themselves as enacting internally-imposed codes rather than heteronomously submitting to external ones. Unlike evangelical Christians, they do not accept that sexuality exists to serve God’s transcendent purposes. Nevertheless, Bobo sex “can’t be just a fun thing between the sheets” but must also be “a profound thing between the ears,” must be something “safe, responsible, and socially constructive.” And the result is that the “most animalistic activities are now enshrouded with guidebooks, how-to videos, and magazine articles written by people with advanced degrees.”¹⁶³ The Bobos aren’t ultimately any more libertarian than evangelical Christians. The difference is that their sexual strictures originate in a more thorough internalization of the buffered identity, which creates its own compulsions. For what was formerly understood as the transcendent purpose of sex has become compressed into sexuality itself, rendering it compulsively purposive. As we already observed at the beginning of this chapter, the “loose” system of morality is not so very loose in the end. And this is because what liberals uphold as the liberation of ordinary human desire from religious and metaphysical illusions has actually *incorporated these very illusions into itself*, incorporated the asceticism that was once set in opposition to that desire. The “naked man in bed expressing his sexuality” is no more authentic or self-transparent than the knight in the “full regalia of his role,” because he proceeds forth with his own regalia—guidebooks, how-to videos, and magazine articles. Once again, what presents itself as the transcendence of all hero-systems is merely the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of that transcendence.

* * *

There is obviously a strong element of hyperbole, overgeneralization, and caricature in Brooks’s depictions, as he surely recognizes and intends. But the satire is not, as Nunberg believes, mere “pickings,” the merely whimsical and arbitrary mocking of political liberals on the basis of purely personal, politically irrelevant tastes and pretensions. On the contrary, the hyperbole, overgeneralization, and caricature are an insurrection of subjugated knowledges. As mere caricature, Brooks’s portraits lie “beneath the level of scientificity or cognition.” Nevertheless, they serve as *under-theorized articulations of the mutation counter-narrative*, in the context of which many recognizably political disagreements also

¹⁶² Ibid., pg. 191-92.

¹⁶³ Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, pg. 194.

make more sense. The personal is political because both are different ways of exposing the contingency of the buffered identity, the ultimate aim of conservative caricature.

Nunberg argues that the intellectual decline of conservatism is illustrated in the contrast between William F. Buckley, who famously quipped that he would rather be governed by the first 2000 names in the Boston phone directory than by the Harvard faculty, and his heir at the *National Review*, Richard Lowry, who, in a novel twist on that quip, remarked that he “would rather be governed by two thousand motorcycle riders than all the Volvo drivers in the United States.” True or not, Buckley’s remark was at least a piece of serious political commentary about the role of intellectuals in public life. By contrast, “Lowry’s remark has no real political content at all.”¹⁶⁴ In their strategy of “guilt-by-brand-association,” conservatives would associate themselves with things like motorcycles, NASCAR races, football, and beer, while associating liberal blue-staters with things like Volvos, skiing, vacations in Nantucket, white wine, and fancy coffee drinks. But consumer preferences are unreliable indicators of actual voting behavior, argues Nunberg. Though conservatives would “assign” motorcycle riding and NASCAR to the political Right, there are in fact two Harley-Davidson dealerships in San Francisco and a NASCAR competition in Sonoma County. And this is because “the NASCAR organization realizes that even those of us who live in places like Northern California, Delaware, Chicago, and the Boston Area may find it thrilling to watch a string of 750-horsepower cars roar by at 140 miles an hour, whatever our views on Social Security privatization.”¹⁶⁵

However, while guilt-by-brand association may not reflect any real correlations between voting behavior and consumer preferences, it is revealing as a symbol of conservative resistance to the buffered distance. What, after all, is the exuberance of chugging cheap domestic beer in the outdoors of a NASCAR track or monster truck competition but a symbolic proxy for the unabashed coarseness of the medieval who, not yet disciplined into a peculiarly courtly rationality, lived in a world defined by squalor, danger, and physicality? And what is the more refined pleasure of sipping white wine or latte at an art gallery but a contemporary variant of the ways of the court? The latter’s emphasis on “good taste” and its “growing sensitivity to nuances of rhythm, tone, and significance” would clearly be out of place at the NASCAR track—someplace where the spiritual and the worldly have *not* been compressed into one another, where ordinary human desire has *not* been imbued with a new spiritual significance!

In identifying themselves with NASCAR, motorcycles, and the like, and identifying liberals with more effete interests, conservatives are simply protesting the disciplines and repressions of the buffered

¹⁶⁴ Nunberg, *Talking Right*, pg. 69.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 79-80.

identity, scapegoating those who have most thoroughly internalized that identity as its root cause. As we saw in Chapter 2, Mike Gallagher believes that liberals despise the “power and thrust” of gas-guzzling V-8 engines, and that in urging environmentally-friendly but relatively impotent electric cars upon the public liberals are asking us “to stop hitting the accelerator—on our cars, on our ambitions, on our appetites, on everything.” Here as elsewhere, what may seem like just an empty ad hominem is in fact anything but that. For what is the “power and thrust” celebrated by Gallagher if not a symbol of the unrestrained and un-subdued affective-instinctual structure of the pre-modern self? What is liberals’ break on the accelerator but the muting and subduing of that structure within the buffered identity? *This* is how conservatism “makes medievalism modern”—by projecting onto the contemporary scene the basic *structure* of the conflicts through which the modern emerged out of the medieval.

If conservative claimants of cultural oppression tout their church-going as much as their ostensibly cruder recreational proclivities, this is in order to assert that they *stand outside* of the secular-spiritual compression atop of which liberalism developed, to assert that the religious and the secular have *not* been compressed in their case. The extent to which church-going and NASCAR can be correlated empirically may be an open question, and has doubtlessly been exaggerated by Republican strategists. But whatever the truth of the matter here, the mutation counter-narrative explains how the two preferences are related conceptually and cosmologically, as part and parcel of an under-theorized articulation of that very narrative. It is on this plane that Lowry’s quip carries political significance, as one more protest against the civilizational repressions chronicled by the mutation counter-narrative. If this protest cannot be readily translated into clear policy prescriptions, this is not because it is apolitical, but because it is of such magnitude as to be civilizational.

As Frank observes, attacking the personal tastes and pretensions of liberals has become the stock in trade of conservative writers. And this is because they seek to erode the prestige of the buffered identity by exposing the *supra-personal* element in those personal tastes and pretensions, to discredit that identity as the disingenuous contradiction of a hero-system predicated on the transcendence of all hero-systems. Hence Brooks’s observation that in their drive to “suffer for beauty” through strenuous high-altitude outdoor experiences, the Bobos “mutilate the body for environmental transcendence.” In doing so, they give expression to the same impulses that once prompted monks to fast, flog themselves with chains, or build “forbidding monasteries on the rocky outcroppings of Wales.”¹⁶⁶ The Bobos do not subscribe to any formal theological doctrine demanding that the body be mutilated for the sake of

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., pg. 209-210.

environmental transcendence. But if they can dispense with traditional religious values, this is not by virtue of any superior secular lucidity, but because, here too, those values have unbeknownst to them been compressed into their secular identities with an unprecedented thoroughness. The ascetic renunciation that was once at home in the monastery has been secularized and built into ordinary life. And this is the intuition that Brooks's caricature is intended to capture.

Nunberg characterizes the overarching theme of conservative claims of cultural oppression as "an America divided into two nations by differences in values, culture, lifestyle." And that is indeed their official text. But underneath that text is a subtext addressing itself, not to unbridgeable differences, but to continuity and symmetry, a subtext that seeks to articulate liberalism and conservatism as *various derivations of the same human constants*, a hero-system. Brooks observes:

We Bobos have taken the bourgeois imperative to strive and succeed, and we have married it to the bohemian impulse to experience new sensations. The result is a set of social regulations constructed to encourage pleasures that are physically, spiritually, and intellectually useful while stigmatizing ones that are useless or harmful. In this way the Protestant Work Ethic has been replaced by the Bobo Play Ethic, which is equally demanding. Everything we do must serve the Life Mission, which is cultivation, progress, and self-improvement.¹⁶⁷

Brooks outs himself as a Bobo in speaking of "We Bobos." But that is a qualified and ambiguous confession, because Brooks thereby announces himself as someone who, though participating in the Bobo dispensation, is also capable of recognizing it *as* a dispensation. Brooks stands outside of the Bobo ethos in order to discern a hero-system where liberals see only the ordinary human desire that remains upon the lopping off of religious and metaphysical illusion. From there he recognizes that "individualism" simply *under-describes* the Bobos, because it omits the disciplinary character of their ethos. Though the Bobos might think themselves as authentic free-spirits standing above the spirit of seriousness, the Code of the Gentleman is, when all is accounted for, no more of a heteronomous imposition than the endless cultivation, progress, and self-improvement atop of which the Bobo identity has been built. The Bobos are *beholden to, disciplined into*, their Life Mission no less than conservatives are beholden to, disciplined into their inherited moral and religious traditions.

Whether the Bobo is perusing sex manuals, waiting on dithering pedestrians, or embarking on strenuous outdoor adventures, the message is that he is, no less than the Gentleman, "waited for by all the tasks placed along the way," operating within a field of social meanings whose "mute demands" permeate his very agency, vitiating the claims to disengaged self-possession upon which his hero-system has been erected. The less thoroughly buffered Gentleman unambiguously subordinates personal

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., pg. 200.

inclination to duty in all aspects of his existence. By contrast, the Bobos are, Brooks says, “trying to build a house of obligation on a foundation of choice.”¹⁶⁸ They may “adhere to dietary restrictions and the like with extraordinary rigor,” but “somehow it is a rigor without submission.”¹⁶⁹ Such is possible for them because the historical process at whose forefront they stand has already built obligation into choice, effecting a submission so total that it is lost from sight, having identified with completely. In carrying his Code on his person, the Gentleman is implicitly reminded of the impulses which would prompt him to transgress it—reminded of the anarchic will of free men and, therefore, that “there are severe limits to the degree in which sin and disorder can be done away with in this world.” But the Bobos, who carry no code, receive no such reminders. For they have *become their code*. And therein lies the bogusness of liberal claims to superior cognitive autonomy, which conservatives believe must be exposed if they are ever to be restored to their proper dignity.

“Conservaphobia” ultimately refers to the buffered identity’s *structural repugnance toward porousness*—whether this be the patriotism “just shining through people’s faces” at Sarah Palin rallies, the intuitive self-confidence of the traditional housewife, or the steely determination of the Gentleman. This repugnance is why conservatives feel they are being attacked, not simply for their ideas, but *in their being*. And they respond by attempting to expose *the buffered identity’s porousness with respect to its ideal of itself as buffered*, the nonexplicit engagement with the world that undergirds this identity’s articulated disengagement from the world. Conservatives are ultimately reacting, not to any antithetical ideas, but to an antagonistic form of agency, and seek to disarm that agency of its prestige by imputing to it the very thing which it opposes in them—the enchanted world of premodernity, an ineradicable heteronomy before a background of social meanings not of one’s own making. The Bobos disavow the embodied feelings of the higher of which conservatives stand unashamed. But the latter’s deeper, instinctive “ways of knowing” tell them that these embodied feelings are being disingenuously lived in sublimated and intellectualized form even as they are denied by liberalism’s official self-conception as the transcendence of all hero-systems, and that these feelings find more honest embodiment in the unalienated wholeness and inarticulate yet steady wisdom of the ordinary American.

If conservatives often react to liberalism with ad hominem attacks rather than facts and arguments, this is because it is the former and not the latter that address the source of their grievances, which is not liberals’ ideas but their presumptions to a more self-transparent and self-regulating form of agency. Conservatives’ attack on the “personal tastes and pretensions” of liberals are *correctives* to the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., pg. 228.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., pg. 243.

unearned rhetorical advantage that accrues to liberals on account of the fact that their Beckerean pseudopods attach to practices that admit of strictly pragmatic rationales—like healthy food, aerobic exercise, and also scholarly gravitas. And this is what permits liberals to misrepresent what is a historically constructed way of being as essential human nature, as just the ordinary human desire that remains upon the discarding of religious and metaphysical illusions. But this is a liberal privilege. If liberals can appear to disdain conservatives' preoccupation with the "merely symbolic," this is owing to the extent to which the symbolic has been compressed into the substantive within the buffered identity. But this is an unearned luxury from the conservative perspective. And it is this inequality which compels them to scour the minutiae of liberals' "personal tastes and pretensions" in search of whatever "wrinkles" in that compression—like puritanical hostility to smoking—might *betray it as a compression*—might suggest that the symbolic has been surreptitiously compressed into the substantive rather than courageously transcended.

Ad hominem reasoning cannot be neatly distinguished from reasoning about the "issues" because the issues express the conceptual entailments generated out of the self-understandings of cultural antagonists. In conflicting against each other, these entailments necessarily grate against the self-conceptions of which they are the theoretical articulations—giving rise to resentment and ad hominem reasoning. That is why the subtext of the arguments marshaled for or against the existence of the relevant rights and obligations is always to charge ideological opponents with a deficit of self-transparency. This is what makes the ad hominem theoretically relevant. They are not directly concerned with ideas, but they offer us windows into structures of the interlocutors' self-understanding, which are the conceptual and existential backdrop against which the ideas are articulated and understood. Ad hominem rhetoric is not an intellectual distraction, but an attempt to articulate an ontology of the human condition, which is what conservative claims of cultural oppression seek to do.

PART THREE

IMPLICATIONS

Chapter Seven

The Ultimate in Sophistication

Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande was anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard's famous study of the witchcraft-centered culture of the Azande tribe of the Congo. Evans-Pritchard discovered that witchcraft is a perennial problem in Zande life. Believing as they do that some of their neighbors are secretly witches who employ their powers to harm or undermine others, Azande devote considerable time and energy to identifying witches through a variety of oracles. After detecting the perpetrator responsible for their woes, they then entreat him to desist from further mischief, when necessary threatening him with disrepute or retaliatory magic. While Evans-Pritchard certainly regarded witchcraft to be a superstition, he disagreed with anthropologists who characterized the "primitive" thought of the Azande as somehow pre-logical or mystical.¹ Rather, he concluded that Zande thinking displayed a consistent logic that was amenable to rational analysis, which he was undertaking to provide. The Azande do not simply believe whatever they choose to believe but rather evaluate empirical evidence according to a consistent set of rules.

But while the Zande mind was not mystical or pre-logical, Evans-Pritchard describes the Azande as relying on *ad hoc* explanations and compartmentalizing contradictory beliefs to a degree that must perplex the Western observer. The "poison oracle" was a prominent example of this. Azande will feed a poison called *benge* to a fowl and then pose yes/no questions to it, specifying in advance that survival signifies "yes" and death signifies "no," or vice versa. As each question is posed twice, the investigator will receive contradictory "responses" as often as not. But the Azande could not be brought to doubt the efficacy of the oracle and would instead trace any inconsistencies to the sabotage of witches or breaches of taboo. Azande's tendency to compartmentalize their beliefs furthermore causes them to overlook the full significance of what they already know.² Realizing that a fowl's size and constitution are factors in its survival, Azande calibrate the dose of *benge* to reflect these. And likewise aware that different batches of *benge* are of varying potency, they administer the poison accordingly. But the Azande stop short of considering the broader implications of what they appear to already understand, the possibility that the

¹ See Steven Lukes, *Relativism in its Place*, in *Rationality and Relativism* *Rationality and Relativism*, eds. M. Hollis and S. Lukes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), pg. 268-69.

² E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 149-50.

oracle's "answer" was entirely a function of these natural factors and has nothing to do with the questions that were posed to it.

This kind of compartmentalization was perhaps at its most egregious when Azande engaged in post-mortem examinations of deceased persons' intestines in search of black "witchcraft substance," in order to posthumously convict or exonerate the deceased of witchcraft. Given that the Azande furthermore believed that witch-status was inherited patrilineally, it followed that only a few such examinations within the tribe should suffice to conclusively identify every witch in the village, nullifying the outcome of some earlier oracular consultations and obviating the need for any further ones. Nevertheless, the Azande persisted in their oracular inquiries as though the identities of witches remained an open question, when those identities appeared settled on *their own premises*. Having brought this problem to the Azande's attention, Evans-Pritchard observed that they "see the sense of the argument but they do not accept its conclusions."³

This refusal of what seems like straightforward logical deduction will strike the scientifically-minded Westerner as unreason pure and simple. But the philosopher Peter Winch questioned this interpretation:

...the Azande when the possibility of this contradiction about the inheritance of witchcraft is pointed out to them, do *not* then come to regard their old beliefs about witchcraft as obsolete. 'They have no theoretical interest in the subject.' This suggests strongly that the context from which the suggestion about contradiction is made, the context of our scientific culture, is not at the same level as the context in which the beliefs about witchcraft operate. Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to get a quasi-scientific understanding of the world. This in turn suggests that it is the European, obsessed with pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go—to a contradiction—who is guilty of a misunderstanding, not the Zande. The European is in fact committing a category-mistake.⁴

The European observer commits a category-mistake because he assumes that Zande oracles constitute a more primitive, more flawed version of his own science. But Winch argues that they in fact constitute an altogether distinct practice, a form of mythico-symbolic expression through which Azande orient themselves socially and ritually toward others and the wider universe. While Zande post-mortem examinations may bear a superficial resemblance to our own scientific experiments, their total cultural context indicates the existence of a rather different enterprise. And if Azande *understand themselves* to be engaged in ritual expression rather than science (or pseudo-science), then they are simply not engaged

³ Ibid., pg. 3

⁴ Peter Winch, *Understanding a Primitive Society*, in RATIONALITY, ed. Brian Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pg. 93.

in science—even if aspects of their behavior resemble what we call an autopsy. The fact that they are unperturbed by what the European sees as an unambiguous theoretical contradiction indicates that they are not primarily in the business of theorizing. And this is why it is an unfair ethnocentric distortion to characterize them as having somehow *failed* to achieve an end, theoretical consistency, which was never their concern in the first place—just as it would be unfair to accuse an impressionistic painter of failing to produce a maximally realistic rendition of his subject. The physical aspect of the Azande’s post-mortem examinations, opening up intestines and scrutinizing their contents, underdetermines their *meaning*, which is a function of *their* purposes rather than what the purposes of the Western investigator would be.⁵

It was natural that Westerners should unselfconsciously superimpose their own categories upon Zande practices. But this superimposition—and hence the judgment that the Azande are scientifically immature—revealed more about the Western observer than it did about the Azande and other “primitive” people. The theoretical and technological prowess of Western culture had, Winch argued, impoverished our own symbolic lives and in doing so inured us to the symbolic lives of others. Our “blindness to the point of primitive modes of life is,” Winch argued, “a corollary of the pointlessness of much of our own life,”⁶ our alienation from those features of the human condition that the Azande went out of their way to acknowledge. If Westerners cannot recognize their category error, this is because it is “extremely difficult for a sophisticated member of a sophisticated society to understand a very simple and primitive society: in a way he must jettison his sophistication, a process which is itself perhaps the ultimate in sophistication.”⁷ Theorizing is a sophisticated activity. But it requires something more than mere sophistication—the “ultimate in sophistication”—to understand the Azande’s practices in the context of their own purposes, which are not grasped by science. “Jettisoning” our sophistication does not mean rejecting science. But it does mean rejecting the parochial scientism that cannot recognize the existence of a different kind of rationality operating underneath what seems like theoretical irrationality.

The upshot of my argument thus far is that a similar kind of criticism can be leveled against liberal assessments of conservative claims of cultural oppression. Indeed, Lee Harris’s qualified defense of the populist conservatives against the exasperation of the liberal elites—or “cognitive elites”—is profitably viewed as a politicized version of Winch’s argument, a defense of the ostensibly “primitive” populist conservative against the scientific ethnocentrism of the liberal culture. Just as the Azande saw “the

⁵ See Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁶ Winch, *Understanding a Primitive Society*, pg. 106.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 102.

sense” of Evans-Pritchard’s argument without feeling compelled to accept its conclusion, so Harris’s populist conservative may likewise “see the sense” of the argument that there is a contradiction between his support for Medicare and his visceral hostility toward “socialized medicine,” or between his insistence on small government and his expectation that America remain the world’s preeminent power. If he does not accept the conclusion that he must therefore reconsider his views, this is because, just like the Azande, he has “no theoretical interest in the subject.” This is why “the ostensible issues are always secondary,” why he is not “particularly interested in honing beautifully crafted logical arguments,” as Harris explains. The populist conservative is not, as Winch would say, “try[ing] to get a quasi-scientific understanding of the world,” but rather endeavoring to lend symbolic expression to the endangered virtues of the ornery American.

The “cognitive elites” lambaste these ornery Americans for their failure to strive toward reflective equilibrium or to expound the details of concrete policy proposals. But paraphrasing Winch, we might say that it is these elites who, being “obsessed with pressing [populist conservative] thought where it would not naturally go—to a contradiction,” are “guilty of a misunderstanding.” The conservative populist is not interested in being accurate but in preserving a particular character type against the ordering impulses of the liberal elites, in preserving a hero-system. If liberals cannot understand the populist conservative’s resentment and resistance, this is because they insist on viewing these through the lens of their own theoretical culture, which reveals contradictions and but not the virtues in whose service those contradictions operate, the way of life in whose context the ostensible contradictions *make sense*. The liberal cognitive elites cannot truly understand the populist conservative because of the sophistication with which they discern his logical fallacies. But these elites might in jettisoning their sophistication achieve the ultimate in sophistication, which would be to recognize that these fallacies are *beside the point* in the context of the populist conservative’s overall project and way of being.

If Westerners’ inability to understand the point of “primitive” ways of life is the corollary of the pointlessness of their own lives, then what the cognitive elites characterize as the populist conservative’s nihilism and obstructionism may reflect the elites’ own failure to understand the conservative culture on its own terms, through categories indigenous to the conservative way of life. The latter is premised, not on logic and evidence, but on the symbolic expression of ideals to which the elites have grown insensible. This is why Harris condemns the elites for their failure to recognize that we “need genuine diversity, not pseudodiversity, a real diversity of temperament, of attitudes, of character types.”⁸ The nuance and

⁸ Lee Harris, *The Next American Civil War: The Populist Revolt Against the Liberal Elite* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pg. 218.

detachment of the professor are to be respected,⁹ but so too must be the temperamental recalcitrance of the ornery American, who preserves the forgotten virtues against a hostile order.¹⁰ It is perhaps to be expected that the cognitive elites will be disposed to judge others according to their cognitive competence. But the “ultimate in sophistication,” Harris is suggesting, is a wider view of history and human nature that provides a more cosmopolitan understanding of the full panoply of human potentialities. To recognize this would be to jettison one’s sophistication and achieve the ultimate in sophistication.

This is precisely what I have been endeavoring to achieve, because to jettison one’s sophistication is to transcend what I have dubbed the epistemological framework. Conservative claims of cultural oppression may not make much sense to liberals as “disinterested representations.” But this is because they are in fact *symbolic articulations of a certain mode of nonexplicit engagement with the world*, the object of which is to highlight the historical contingency and social artificiality of the buffered identity. Yet this is precisely what the epistemological framework prevents us from seeing. William Barrett writes:

In modern philosophy particularly (philosophy since Descartes), man has figured almost exclusively as an epistemological subject—as an intellectual that registers sense-data, makes propositions, reasons, and seeks the certainty of intellectual knowledge, but not the man underneath all this, who is born, suffers, and dies. Naturally, the attempt to see the whole or integral man, in place of the rational or epistemological fragment of him, involves our taking a look at some unpleasant things.¹¹

The ethnocentrism of liberals consists in the fact that they conceptualize the meaning of conservative claims of cultural oppression through the lens of the “epistemological subject” and then conclude that these claims are epistemologically deficient. But these claims in fact constitute a counter-cultural assault against that very lens, an effort to articulate what lies underneath the “epistemological fragment” of man and thereby reveal the latter as a derivation upon something more primordial, which cannot itself be understood in epistemological terms. This is cosmological orientation and the hero-systems it supports. Liberals cannot understand conservative claims of cultural oppression because the structure of their identities inures them to this human constant and therefore to the fact that conservatives are defending one cosmological orientation against another, resisting the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity in favor of an earlier, more “pre-modern” form of consciousness. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are not a theoretical system but conservatives’ attempt to articulate this conflict, to articulate

⁹ Ibid., pg. 219.

¹⁰ Ibid., pg. 208.

¹¹ William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1958), pg. 296.

their under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative. And this is exactly what liberal rationalism cannot process.

As we will now see, the epistemological framework suppresses, not only an anthropologically thicker description of conservative claims of cultural oppression, but also the normative implications of that thicker description. Conservative claims of cultural oppression raise a question about whether liberalism is vitiated by some disguised indeterminacy which, once revealed, would permit an extension of liberal ideals onto conservative grievances. And I will here be explaining how it is the epistemological framework that occludes this indeterminacy from view, and so suppresses the questions that recognizing the indeterminacy would raise into relief. To recognize these questions is to achieve the ultimate in sophistication, and this is our aim here.

1. Expressive Moderation

Dan Kahan observes that liberals lose their usual reluctance to abridge individual freedom without strong evidence of the offending behavior's harmfulness when the issue is gun control. Gun control gets defended on utilitarian grounds, with the commonsense proposition that the ready availability of firearms increases the risk of death and injury. But common sense can mislead, and Kahan notes that, according to economist Steven Levitt's calculations, "having a swimming pool in one's backyard is a hundred times more lethal for a child than having a gun somewhere inside one's home."¹² If gun control advocates were principally motivated by a utilitarian yearning to prevent empirically demonstrable harms, then they should as good utilitarians shift their limited resources away from gun control and toward regulating backyard swimming pools. But most gun control advocates will not be in the mood for this kind of career change, whatever the data turn out to be. And this suggests that there is something disingenuous about framing one's support for gun control in strictly utilitarian terms. Gun control advocates do wish to reduce harms, but their perception and anticipation of harm reflects cultural commitments that are irreducible to harm reduction. As symbols of "patriarchy and racism, indifference and distrust,"¹³ guns represent an affront to their egalitarian and communitarian sensibilities. And this is why they pay attention to guns rather than swimming pools.

Liberalism aspires to a form of rational discourse that, having been purged of all controversial conceptions of the good, can proceed in terms that can resonate with the entire range of diverse worldviews that make up a modern, pluralistic democracy. But Kahan argues that this aspiration to a

¹² Dan M. Kahan, *The Cognitively Illiberal State*, 60 Stan. L. Rev. 115, 135 (2007).

¹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 134.

culturally-neutral legal regime is unattainable, because the human mind is cognitively illiberal. Our perception or anticipation of particular harms and benefits is a function of values more robust than is acknowledged in our utilitarian principles. For it is on the basis of just these values that we assess what the harms and benefits consist in. That is why egalitarians and communitarians will perceive environmental danger more readily than free-market individualists, because regulating that danger is fully congruous with regulating the “commercial activities that generate inequality and legitimize the unconstrained pursuit of individual self-interest.” The individualists, by contrast, will be slower to perceive environmental danger precisely because “they cherish [the] markets and private orderings” that will be disrupted by their regulation, and will instead worry “that excessive gun control will render individuals unable to defend themselves, a belief congenial to the association of guns with individualist virtues such as self-reliance, courage, and martial prowess.”¹⁴ In both cases, harm-assessments are being informed by cultural commitments that cannot simply be wished away. This is why Kahan objects to liberalism, not on metaphysical or political grounds, but on cognitive ones. The problem is that liberalism calls upon us to do the impossible—to “make, interpret, and administer law without indulging sensibilities pervaded by our attachments to highly contested visions of the good.”¹⁵

Such indulgence—the equation of moral vice with physical danger and of moral virtue with health and prosperity—was undisguised in pre-modern societies, where natural disasters were attributed to religious impiety or moral transgression.¹⁶ But Kahan believes that these kinds of association remain subtly at play in modern life, informing all manner of ostensibly hard-nosed empirical debates, including global warming, nuclear power, drug use, and gun control.¹⁷ There is no easy escape from this predicament, which is a byproduct of modern life itself:

We moderns are no less disposed to believe that moral transgressions threaten societal harm. This perception is not, as is conventionally supposed, a product of superstition or unreasoning faith in authority. Rather it is the predictable consequence of the limited state of any individual's experience with natural and social causation, and the role that cultural commitments inevitably play in helping to compensate for this incompleteness in knowledge. What truly distinguishes ours from the premodern condition in this sense is not the advent of modern science; it is the multiplication of cultural worldviews, competition among which has generated historically unprecedented conflict over how to protect society from harm at the very same time that science has progressively enlarged our understandings of how our world works.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 123.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 116-17.

¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 118.

¹⁷ Ibid., pg. 131-42.

¹⁸ Ibid., pg. 119.

The “cognitive illiberalism” that was patent in pre-modern cultures is the natural byproduct of our cognitive limitations as finite human beings. Our limited comprehension of the facts and of their causal relations compel reliance on partisan cultural commitments to fill in inductive gaps, which must be plugged up somehow in the process of developing law and social policy. That is why “we naturally view behavior that denigrates our moral norms as endangering public health, undermining civil order, and impeding the accumulation of societal wealth.”¹⁹ Our attempts to resolve ostensibly empirical and non-sectarian disagreements have remained imperfectly rational because we simply lack the resources to update our beliefs in response to new evidence without “recourse to the very same cultural heuristics that have generated ..[our] existing beliefs.”²⁰ Most people are not scientific specialists and cannot readily assess the opposing science that is constantly laid before the public. And so their own reliance on science—the decision to trust one expert or study rather than another—is necessarily guided by something other than science, their moral/cultural worldviews. Such recourse being inescapable, the view that “science will inevitably pull these cultural authorities into agreement with themselves reflects unwarranted optimism.”²¹

With cognitive illiberalism being our inescapable lot, Kahan argues that we would do well to abandon the pretense of hard-nosed empiricism in our policy debates and instead acknowledge our cultural partisanship. Abstention from ideological self-indulgence being impossible, the proper response to ideological discord lies not in some impossible ideal of state moral neutrality, but in “expressive overdetermination.” Whereas the public reason defended by Rawls and other liberals requires political actors to “discharge the duty of civility by appealing to the ‘overlapping consensus’ of justifications common to all comprehensive views,” expressive overdetermination turns this principle on its head and demands that this duty be discharged “by self-consciously constructing a discourse of overlapping dissensus comprising a plurality of justifications distinctive of the plural and opposing worldviews held by society's members.”²²

As an example of expressive overdetermination, Kahan cites France’s national abortion law as related by Mary Ann Glendon:

That law made abortion legal not "on demand," but "for a reason." A woman seeking to terminate her pregnancy was obliged to certify that doing so was necessitated by a condition of "emergency" sufficient to justify overriding the fetus's "right to life." This provision affirmed the worldview of religious traditionalists, who had opposed abortion on demand as expressively denigrating the

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 117.

²⁰ Ibid., pg. 121-22.

²¹ Ibid., pg. 124.

²² Ibid., pg. 145-46.

sanctity of life. At the same time, the law made the individual woman's certification of "emergency" dispositive; it provided for no legal review of the basis or adequacy of it.²³

Kahan believes that we can achieve practicable solutions to pressing social problems and temper ideologically driven cultural conflicts by devising laws and policies that, rather than presenting themselves as morally and culturally neutral, lend themselves to multiple moral/cultural interpretations, and so afford official recognition to the diversity of worldviews that must be appeased in a pluralistic democracy. This is exactly what the French law attempted to achieve. Expressive overdetermination means that we agree not "to engage in forms of advocacy calculated to render laws and policies univocal in their meanings."²⁴ Rather than unconsciously projecting our cultural allegiances onto our policy disputes under the guise of a public, non-sectarian reason, we should under the principle of "expressive candor" strive to self-consciously articulate our cultural worldviews, in order to ensure that they, but not they alone, are appeased by suitably crafted legislation. Legislation so promulgated can, Kahan argues, be expected temper the resentment that is bound to arise when we feel that the state has endorsed a worldview inimical to our own, and will thereby facilitate the more empirically-minded deliberation to which such resentment is presently an obstacle.

This is practicable, Kahan argues, because most people are "expressive moderates." While they will zealously oppose laws they perceive as symbolically denigrating their cultural worldviews, they are prepared to support laws that can be variously interpreted as vindicating both their own and others' worldviews.²⁵ Because most people's need for cultural identity affirmation is largely defensive in nature, expressive politics need not be a zero-sum game.²⁶ If they have in fact become a zero-sum game, this is owing to our bad habit of denying rather than acknowledging and appropriately channeling our partisan allegiances. Cognitive illiberalism generates partisan animosity, and therefore empirical blindness, not because most people are ideological zealots, but because they resent the conceit with which their opponents attempt to impose a moral orthodoxy under the guise of value-free reason.²⁷ People naturally respond to this pretense in kind, pushing laws and policies designed to promote their own orthodoxies under a thin veneer of scientific neutrality. The end result is a self-perpetuating cycle of "illiberal status competition" in which cultural groups employ the machinery of the state to broadcast symbolic messages denigrating the worldviews of opposing groups, with each repartee lending more fuel to the fire,

²³ Ibid., pg. 146.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 145.

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 149.

²⁶ Ibid., pg. 149.

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 118.

propelling us further along a downward spiral.²⁸ The purpose of expressive overdetermination is arrest this descent. It is a formula for easing us into expressive moderation and replacing a vicious cycle with a virtuous one. Being assured that the policy to be enacted will not be employed to symbolically denigrate their worldviews and identities, expressive moderates will be more willing to focus their energies on narrowly pragmatic and empirical questions, as they can now rest assured that the answers to these will not be used against them whatever they turn out to be.

* * *

Insofar as Kahan is seeking to expose the operations of hero-systems at play underneath facially disengaged ratiocination, his perspective is consistent with the one I have been advancing in these pages. Of particular relevance is his observation that even debates that proceed without any overt manipulation of cultural symbols nevertheless have a symbolic/cultural dimension. Even bare statements of fact can be deployed in ways that corroborate some cultural outlooks and identities at the expense of others.²⁹ Cultural warfare is not simply an idle if exhilarating distraction which we can just refuse to indulge, but the perennial subtext of public debate, something that obtrudes itself even in ostensibly culturally-neutral debates about “bread-and-butter” issues.

But while Kahan’s argument is undoubtedly sophisticated, it fails to achieve the ultimate in sophistication as I have defined it. And this is because his very attempt to preempt “illiberal status competition” is itself an instance of that competition. For the ideal of “expressive moderation” upon which that attempt is premised is itself *expressive of the buffered identity* taken to its logical conclusion; it is an ideal that serves to uphold that identity and the epistemological framework as the essential human nature in relation to which everything else is a mere distortion. This is why liberalism’s very attempt to overcome parochialism and sectarianism remains tainted by them, because expressive moderation is the outgrowth of the “original spiritual vision” whose emergence is tracked by the mutation counter-narrative.

The expressive moderate is at his core an “epistemological subject,” as Barrett says “an intellectual that registers sense-data, makes propositions, reasons, and seeks the certainty of intellectual knowledge.” Kahan recognizes that human beings are less than perfectly rational, of course. But his expressive moderates possess a strategic/epistemological faculty that, while finite in its capabilities, is perfect within its own sphere—enjoying an existence that is non-ideological in its essence. Hovering

²⁸ Ibid., pg. 154.

²⁹ Ibid., pg. 130.

above the strategic/epistemological faculty is an ideological faculty, to which the former will sometimes defer when incapable of proceeding by its own devices. To the extent there remains an open question as to things' causes, various cultural heuristics serve to imbue resonance into those causal hypotheses that seem to vindicate our ideological visions. But this means that the ideological faculty is in the end of only secondary importance. The ideological faculty is to the epistemological faculty what Plato's "spirited" auxiliaries are to the Republic's rationalistic Guardians, a mere adjunct. Kahan relegates ideological commitment to the periphery of our agency structure, casting it as a necessary indulgence that is extrinsic to the core of our being. Our "attachments to highly contested visions of the good" are just adjuncts functioning to fill in cognitive gaps arising from our merely intellectual limitations, adjuncts to a strategic agent exercising his epistemological functions in pursuit of non-sectarian goods—public health, civil order, and the accumulation of societal wealth. These goods cannot always be *realized* without occasional recourse to our sectarian commitments, but they can be *identified* independently of these commitments. This is why Kahan objects to liberalism on cognitive rather than metaphysical grounds. Kahan accepts that hero-systems are an inescapable part of the human condition. But this is only because they are the "predictable consequence of the limited state of any individual's experience with natural and social causation," and not something that lies closer to the core of human nature as such.

This is consistent with what we have come to understand of the liberal worldview. Kahan's call for expressive moderation through expressive overdetermination is in essence a prescription for containing anthropocentricity and recognizing ourselves as strategic agents to the extent our flawed nature permits. Kahan recognizes that our ethically and cosmologically thicker commitments cannot be put out of play entirely. But he believes that they can be tempered in a way that allows us to more closely approximate the strategic ideal of a self-possessed, disengaged consciousness—a consciousness that can more readily distinguish between the subjective world of human meaning and the objective world of cause and effect, and so register the laws of the latter with less interference from the former. While we may be deeply invested in our ideological commitments, there is always the possibility of ideological divestment, and expressive overdetermination is a formula for achieving some measure of it—for weakening the grip of Beckerean pseudopods in order to operate within a more symbolically neutral environment. Being assuring that the social meanings to which our pseudopods have become attached will be validated by the state, we will achieve the emotional equanimity to become more detached from them, and so recognize their springs in our own psychological needs, awareness of which can only function to further fortify our commitment to expressive moderation. Kahan eschews the *direct* pursuit of a

strategic self-conception through ideological neutrality, and instead proposes to achieve it *circuitously*, through a regime of expressive overdetermination and expressive moderation.

But this makes Kahan's prescriptions more sectarian than he recognizes. Kahan's call for expressive moderation illustrates what is a strong tendency among liberals to *intellectualize* what we call "worldviews" or "conceptions of the good," to view these as things that are, like the excarnated religion promoted by Religion Reform, "in the head." Thus conceived, they are either legitimate subjects of public debate and legitimate motivations for voting behavior or else the potential targets of political manipulation, as when voters are suckered into sacrificing substantive interests in return for the fulfillment of symbolic ones. They are either opinions whose discussion must be confined to the private sphere or else expressive needs that, being recalcitrant to such confinement, must be maximally segregated from substantive (empirical) concerns and negotiated on a separate plane in a way that will minimize any spillover into the substantive sphere—the goal of expressive overdetermination.

But not having internalized the buffered identity as thoroughly as liberals, conservatives resist this intellectualization. Their worldviews exist, not in their heads, but in the world itself. Kahan maintains that the difference between modern and pre-moderns consists, not in what some imagine should be the former's immunity from the potentially distortive influence of cultural worldview on empirical deliberation, but in the *number* of potentially distortive worldviews that are in play. Whereas pre-modern cultures were homogenous, modern ones are pluralistic. But the difference runs deeper than this. As Taylor observes, in archaic societies "what we might call a construal of the moral/spiritual is lived not as such, but as immediate reality, like stones, rivers, and mountains."³⁰ Pre-moderns' "construal of the moral/spiritual" was enfleshed rather than excarnated, and so was not amenable to the kind of abstraction that permits one to see it in intellectualized terms, as a kind of self-indulgence whose requirements have been projected on a normatively-barren order of nature. What *Kahan* can conceptualize as a "construal of the moral/spiritual" that has been given its due by the French abortion law's wording is for conservatives lived in the "immediate reality" of an abortable unborn child. The personhood of the fetus is not an opinion about the fetus, a merely expressive need, but something that is "just there" in the fetus. This is why conservatives must reject expressive moderation, because they reject the identity that would enable them to see their political commitments as expressive needs in the first place.

³⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 12.

Jeremy Waldron writes that liberals' commitment to pluralism requires them to "assume that all ethical commitment has a common form: that there is something like *pursuing a conception of the good life* that all people, even those with the most diverse commitments, can be said to be engaged in."³¹ But not everyone is disposed to abstract away from their particular ideals and experiences in order to rise toward this homogenizing vantage point, which is the product of the buffered identity. What some people may identify as a "conception of the good life" is for others too intertwined with their sense of self to be recognized as the species of a genus to which others are also entitled. Hence what Waldron sees as the liberal's essential dilemma:

Faced with these possibilities, the liberal has a hard choice. Either he concedes that his conception of political judgment will be appealing only to those who hold their commitments in a certain 'liberal' spirit. Or he must look for a form of social order in which not only those with different ideals, but those with different views about the legitimacy of imposing their ideals, can be accommodated. Since the prospects for a social order of this kind are not very promising, the former more robust response seems the only one available. But if this line is taken, we must abandon any claim about the 'neutrality' of liberal politics. The liberal will have to concede that he has a great many more enemies (real enemies – people who will suffer under a liberal dispensation) than he has usually pretended to have.³²

Liberals typically attempt to evade this hard choice, however. And they do so by in one way or another *moralizing* the refusal to hold one's commitments in a "certain 'liberal' spirit" as self-indulgence or mean-spiritedness, as a brute and ultimately gratuitous rejection of the self-restraint that liberals are prepared to impose on themselves. These intemperate individuals are, after all, refusing the "expressive moderation" that is enough to satisfy others. And this means that whatever harms befall them under a liberal regime are the consequence of their own gratuitous obtuseness, not the liberal regime itself, whose demands are entirely reasonable given the kinds of beings we truly are—buffered selves given to expressive moderation. This is why the liberal doesn't consider his opponents to be "real enemies" and can believe himself to be in some way "neutral." Liberals see themselves as neutral because they understanding their prescriptions as emanating logically from the perspective of the strategic subject beholding a "neutral environment" purged of anthropocentric contamination. This perspective being essential human nature liberated from teleological confinement, there can be no real reason for refusing it, and real enemies have real reasons.

But the mutation counter-narrative reveals that the reasons *are* real. Conservatives' resistance to the neutral environment of the strategic agent is not gratuitous self-indulgence, the quirk of the

³¹ Jeremy Waldron, Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 147 (Apr. 1987), 127, 144.

³² *Ibid.*, pg. 145.

authoritarian personality, and rather reflects human nature's default porousness, which is being targeted by the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. These are why liberalism has real enemies, why expressive moderation will not appeal conservatives. Though pluralistic on its face, expressive moderation constitutes one more demand for the heightened affective-instinctual control of the buffered identity and its secularized asceticism. Kahan does not demand that our affects be put wholly out of play, but it is in the same spirit that he seeks to create conditions under which they can be suitably regulated *by being recognized as affects*. He is thereby seeking to impose what is a particular disciplinary regime, an "austere ethics," if not of belief-formation, then of belief-expression, and really of belief-conceptualization.

But conservatives reject these disciplines, which is why the French abortion law cited by Kahan would be patently incapable of appeasing American pro-lifers. This is not only because what is being held out as a compromise between pro-lifers and pro-choicers is in its *function* a regime of abortion on demand but, just as significantly, because the "emergency" certification requirement would resonate with American pro-lifers as a hollow, transparently patronizing overture to the conviction that a fetus is a moral person. The pursuit of expressive moderation would essentially turn the legislative process into a group therapy circle. For the French abortion law implicitly characterizes the motivations that drive pro-lifers as akin to the emotions that would be aired in this setting. The expectation is that the group's participants learn to trace their worldviews to their idiosyncratic psychological proclivities. And the understanding is that each participant may express his stance toward abortion without censure, in return for which he must acknowledge that his political commitments are ultimately expressive needs, which others need only validate *as expressive needs*. But pro-lifers must regard this as the ultimate insult, as the "illiberal status competition" of the dominant liberal dispensation. For expressive moderation is just another way of pushing the buffered identity and its ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. What McConnell and other conservatives condemn as a discrepancy between liberal theory and liberal practice is a function of the fact that liberalism can be tolerant of diverse beliefs only because it first normalizes certain "excarnated" *ways of believing* while stigmatizing those who refuse this normalization as having failed to fulfill the "duty of civility," for which expressive moderation is a prescription.

This must vitiate liberal neutrality in the eyes of conservatives. Kahan recommends that laws be crafted in ways that avoid insulting the sensibilities of different cultural constituencies. But what qualifies as an insult is itself a function of these sensibilities—that is, a function of whether one lives one's "construal of the moral/spiritual" as a construal or as an immediate reality. The ultimate in sophistication is the sophistication to recognize this, to recognize that the broad-minded tolerance ostensibly signified

by expressive overdetermination is, in its ultimate subtext, a form of symbolic *aggression* against those who refuse the excarnation of the buffered identity—another expression of that identity’s intellectualized, sublimated cruelty. While Kahan defends “expressive candor,” his prescriptions are on this level just another contribution to the “censorship of fashion” of insinuated ridicule, which mocks and trivializes through its very claims to understanding and tolerance.

Expressive moderation may be an effective prescription for (relative) non-sectarianism among those for whom the buffered identity has become second nature. But this identity is itself sectarian among those who have not, among those who can see this identity as indeed *second* nature, a superimposition on human nature’s default state. Liberalism is compromised by illiberalism, not only cognitively and epistemologically, but also cosmologically and physiologically, because an “original spiritual vision” has been built into liberalism’s most basic, pre-cognitive impulses—the reason expressive moderation can resonate with liberals. If liberals fail to attain the ultimate in sophistication, this is because they cannot recognize how the level of abstraction at which they conceptualize the disjunction between the sectarian and the non-sectarian is itself a sectarian phenomenon, a product of excarnation and the spiritual vision that animates it. What liberals represent as their expressive restraint is from conservatives’ vantage point an expressive *indulgence*, the assertion of the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity against those who resist it. Most people may indeed be expressive moderates. But this is because they have been *trained and disciplined into that role*, and because that role has become a source of its own spiritual satisfactions. One of these satisfactions is what Kahan calls “the duty of civility,” which expressive overdetermination and the overlapping consensus each seek to discharge in their own way. And this is why liberals are, in the very act of demanding civility of conservatives, engaged in the greatest incivility of all, the incivility of imposing their own historically constructed form of agency as through it was unalloyed human nature just waiting to be liberated.

2. The Amygdala Theory of Conservatism

The same kind of liberal ethnocentricity can be discovered in what Goldberg decries as the “always new science of conservative phrenology”—the study of political attitudes’ origins in our biological substratum—which he believes is being deployed by liberals in order to defame conservatives as mentally defective. As in Kahan’s call for expressive moderation, the new conservative phrenology is characterized by a certain sophistication which disguises what is the absence of the ultimate in sophistication. And as with Kahan, this is because the privileging of the epistemological subject occludes from view what are the *supra-epistemological implications* of the discourse, occludes how cultural warfare is a struggle, not

primarily between opposed beliefs, but between opposed ways of being. In reducing conservatism to one or another form of narrowness or dogmatism, the new conservative phrenology obscures how conservatism constitutes a form of resistance against the civilizing process and its outcome in the buffered identity. In concealing this, it illustrates from another perspective how liberals can, as Waldron says, pretend to have far fewer real enemies than they actually do. I will survey these developments in this section and then examine both their uses and their limitations in the next one.

Much of the new conservative phrenology is summarized in science writer Chris Mooney's *The Republican Brain*, which offers an intriguing physiological explanation for why conservatives may be less well-disposed than liberals toward "expressive moderation." Mooney reports that magnetic resonance imaging reveals that whereas conservatives tend to have a larger right amygdala, the evolutionarily more ancient part of the brain that generates immediate flight or fight responses to threatening stimuli, liberals tend to possess more gray matter in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), the evolutionarily newer system that suspends such automatic responses in order to assess facts and detect errors.³³ While conservatives tend to be more instinctive and given to immediate reflex actions, liberals are more reflective and cognitive, able to suspend automatic fear responses in order to undertake a more careful evaluation of the facts. The ideology of conservatives, says Mooney, is "reflected in their *physiology*." Every human, just like every animal, possesses a "fear system" capable of "rapid-fire defensive reactions." But that system appears to be stronger, more predominant among conservatives.³⁴

The physiological origin of political disagreement was confirmed by a study in which patrons exiting a bar were flagged down and offered blood alcohol tests in exchange for completing a short questionnaire about their political beliefs. The researchers discovered that alcohol shifts us to the right politically, as blood alcohol level was correlated with the expression of more conservative views among self-described liberals and conservatives alike.³⁵ The explanation, one researcher suggested, was that "people's cognitive architecture is more consistent with conservative ideology, because that's the way brains are built."³⁶ Conservatism, then, may represent the more "natural" human (and animal) state which has for whatever reasons become comparatively suppressed among liberals—with the disinhibiting effects of alcohol temporarily resetting the latter closer to the default setting in which evolutionarily older rapid-fire reactions overwhelm the ACC

³³ Chris Mooney, *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), pg. 111.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 114.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 108.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 109.

This “amygdala theory of conservatism” was also supported by a University of Nebraska study, which discovered that tough-on-crime, strongly pro-military conservatives “have a more pronounced startle reflex, measured by eye-blink strength after hearing a sudden loud noise.” Conservatives also exhibited greater “skin conductance”—a moistening of sweat glands indicating sympathetic nervous system arousal—when shown threatening images like maggots in an open wound or a large spider on someone’s face.³⁷ By contrast, “[i]ndividuals with measurably lower physical sensitivities to sudden noises and threatening visual images were more likely to support foreign aid, liberal immigration policies, pacifism, and gun control.”³⁸ The theory was also corroborated by an Italian study demonstrating that conservatives more than liberals displayed “automatic selective attention to negative stimuli.” When shown a series of positive and negative words in different colors, conservatives proved less able to recall the colors that accompanied negative words—like “vomit,” “horrible,” “disorder,” and “disgust.” They were more than liberals distracted by the negativity, and so were less attentive to their surroundings.³⁹

Mooney believes that conservatives’ larger amygdalas affect how they process information in general and political information in particular. Liberals and conservatives differ, not only in the contents of their beliefs, but also in the degree of rigidity and inflexibility with which they hold these beliefs.⁴⁰ A large body of studies across many countries has revealed that “conservatives tend to have a greater need for closure than do liberals.”⁴¹ Whereas the preeminence of the ACC in liberals affords them an “Open personality,” the more robust amygdala of conservatives endows them with a “Closed personality.” Given its “high need for closure,” this personality-type will tend to “seize on a piece of information that dispels doubt or uncertainty, and then *freeze*, refusing to admit or consider new information.”⁴² This is why so many conservatives could have believed against all the evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden were collaborators, “finding themselves unable to escape the quagmire of unreality even after several years had passed.”⁴³ It is also why conservatives tend to “select themselves into belief-affirming information streams” like Fox News or right-wing talk radio,⁴⁴ through which they shield themselves against the “belief challenges” leveled by what

³⁷ Ibid., pg. 113

³⁸ Cited from, Jonah Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas* (Sentinel 2012), pg. 209-10.

³⁹ Mooney, *Republican Brain*, pg. 261.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pgs. 10, 71.

⁴¹ Ibid., pg. 69.

⁴² Ibid., pg. 69.

⁴³ Ibid., pg. 46.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pg. 158.

they dismiss as the liberal media.⁴⁵ Conservatives' angry defensiveness before inconvenient truths is the predictable consequence of their particular neurological make-up. With their strong amygdalas pressing for immediate reactions and their comparatively weak ACCs incapable of restraining that impulse, conservatives are less able to suspend judgment. But being more tolerant of ambiguity and capable of integrative complexity, the Open personality of liberals is "much more accepting of change and new ideas," much more prepared to suspend judgment in the absence of evidence or to alter their judgment with the arrival of new evidence.

Mooney does not deny that there exist intellectually sophisticated conservatives who know how to construct arguments and cite evidence. But even here it appears that the ACC is ultimately subservient to the amygdala, because these sophisticated conservatives are in the end merely "smart idiots" who employ their sophistication to rationalize what they already believe. This was confirmed by a study that discovered that college-educated conservatives are *more* skeptical of global warming than their less educated brethren.⁴⁶ By contrast with these smart idiots, sophisticated liberals are just plain smart. Unlike conservatives, they are prepared to apportion their beliefs to the weight of the evidence, weigh counterarguments, and modify their views accordingly.⁴⁷

Being human, individual liberals may of course go astray here and there, as when their countercultural impulses lead them to air false claims about vaccination, nuclear power, fracking, or the efficacy of holistic medicine. But all is not equal between liberals and conservatives. Liberal ideologies will seduce some liberals some of the time. But the liberal psychology and the liberal culture operate as an effective check against the cognitive derelictions of individual liberals. Liberal ideologies do not generate large followings because the Left's psychology of disobedience and anti-authoritarianism ensures that those who make empirically unsupported claims "will be challenged, sometimes quite vigorously or even viciously."⁴⁸ Whereas conservative elites indulge their followers' motivated cognition, their liberal counterparts can be counted upon to condemn whatever hokum grows out of their own ranks.⁴⁹ This is rarer among conservatives, whose "pro-authority biases" drive them to be "more unified and supportive of their political 'team.'" Conservatives are "less willing to pick a fight with their friends, less likely to issue a corrective when they need to issue one, less motivated to step out of rank and call

⁴⁵ Ibid., pg. 166.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pg.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pgs. 232, 185.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pg. 234.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pg. 185.

out bogus assertions.”⁵⁰ By contrast, liberals care little for obedience and group solidarity.⁵¹ Being “children of the Enlightenment,” they “don’t bow to authority, or pledge allegiance to a team.”⁵²

This Enlightenment heritage is why even the most ideological and emotional of liberals “remain allied with scientists, who just aren’t going to put up with any nonsense in their fields of expertise.” Liberals and scientists are usually on the same side of the issues because liberals’ Open personality, with its curiosity, tolerance, and flexibility naturally disposes them toward the scientific method, compelling a respect for scientists that is less common among conservatives.⁵³ Whereas conservatives routinely dismiss science and expertise, it is “hard, psychologically,” says Mooney “for liberals to buck what scientists say, and to withstand the intellectual beating that is sure to follow if they do.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, conservatives’ Closed personalities lands them in overwhelming conflict with the conclusions of modern science on a wide range of issues.⁵⁵ Hence what is a very wide “expertise gap” between liberals and conservatives in the modern world.⁵⁶

Seeking to close this gap, conservatives now foster their own “counterexpertise to thwart mainstream knowledge.”⁵⁷ Sustained by think tanks and other institutions, this counterexpertise is charged with maintaining “an alternative reality on the right” through which conservatives are provided with the “evidence” and “arguments” needed to fuel their ideologically motivated cognition.⁵⁸ Having seceded from the common reality occupied by liberals and independents, conservatives have “their own ‘truth,’ their own experts to spout it, and their own communication channels—newspapers, cable networks, talk radio shows, blogs, encyclopedias, think tanks, even universities—to broad- and narrowcast it.”⁵⁹ All these operate in the service of the “belief affirmation and ideological activation”⁶⁰ that ultimately drives conservatives, legitimating the promptings of their amygdalas as rational responses to bedrock truth. Being embodied human organisms, liberals have their own neurologically driven psychological needs to satisfy. But those needs include “the need for cognition and the need for accuracy, as well as the need to distinguish oneself from others and stand out, to be unique rather than part of the

⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 83.

⁵¹ Ibid., pg. 227.

⁵² Ibid., pg.

⁵³ Ibid., pg. 236.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 226.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 180.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 84.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pg. 182.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pg. 145.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pg. 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pg. 138.

herd.”⁶¹ While liberals are also attached to their core values emotionally, those values happen to include “the Enlightenment belief that if you can’t get the facts right, you can’t solve the problem and make the world better.”⁶²

At the same time, these Enlightenment convictions have also kept liberals from truly understanding conservatives. Against all the evidence, liberals persist in the naïve faith in the rationality, or potential rationality, of conservatives, believing that the right, properly formulated argument will somehow, someday bring the conservative around. While this hope has been dashed time and again, many liberals continue to retain it. For they have, as children of the Enlightenment, projected what is a culturally specific dispensation—the demand for reasons, arguments, and evidence—onto human nature as such, including the conservatives in whom this faculty has yet to be liberated. But this is a distortion. For conservatives’ amygdalas cannot simply be argued away, and liberals will never succeed in persuading conservatives of anything without first taking this into account. This would have to involve, not logically tighter argumentation, but defusing conservatives’ natural fear and defensiveness vis-à-vis the unknown and untried. And this means being more attentive to the pre-rational, identitarian motivations to which the children of the Enlightenment tend to give short shrift, for these are what drive conservatives onward.

* * *

As we already began to see in an earlier chapter, George Lakoff has some recommendations about how this might be undertaken, how liberals might move beyond the limitations of their traditional Enlightenment worldview. Lakoff argues that conservatives have succeeded in gradually nudging so many “biconceptuals” to the right because they recognize better than liberals that “politics is not just about policy and interest groups and issue-by-issue debate.”⁶³ Understanding this, conservatives could enact “cognitive policies” aiming to “change brains in a conservative direction.”⁶⁴ Embracing the mythic, metaphorical, and emotional aspects of politics, they constructed a language that actively framed particular policy choices in accordance with Strict Father morality, promoting, not only the particular policy prescriptions at issue, but also the frameworks of metaphor into which new issues will be automatically subsumed.⁶⁵ Hence slogans like “tax relief,” which in evoking the plight of the beleaguered

⁶¹ Ibid., pg. 227.

⁶² Ibid., pg. 218.

⁶³ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (The University of Chicago Press 2002), pg. 19.

⁶⁴ George Lakoff: *The Political Mind: Why You Can’t Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (Viking, 2008), pg. 169.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pg. 170.

“model citizen” discourage taxpayers from viewing themselves as nurturers whose tax dollars contribute to the public good.⁶⁶ Hence too the “war on terror,” which in activating a fear response also activated the broader conservative worldview by alluding to the need for a strong authority figure and protector.⁶⁷ Conservatives have known how to skillfully deploy a set of ideas, images, and symbols that activate the conservative disposition by increasing the “synaptic strength of the neurons in the circuitry characterizing conservative thought” while inhibiting progressivism by correspondingly weakening the progressive synaptic circuitry. In doing so, they have made it easier and easier for Strict Father morality to become “neurally bound” with specific issues,⁶⁸ often exploiting traumatic events like 9/11 in whose aftermath the synaptic connections of human beings are more susceptible to reconditioning.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, the rationalistic and technocratic bent of liberalism has often alienated the American public. By remaining tied to an “Old Enlightenment” view according to which reason is “conscious, literal, logical, universal, unemotional, disembodied,”⁷⁰ liberals have demonstrated themselves to be out of touch with the actual springs of our political allegiances, inadvertently reinforcing liberalism’s reputation as foreign and elitist.⁷¹ The American public may not agree with conservative policy prescriptions. But those prescriptions are never evaluated in the abstract, but always in the context of particular frames whose resonance for us is a function of the broader neural systems they can activate. And conservatives have proven adept at systematically cultivating those systems which serve their cause.

Though brain and cognitive science have amply discredited the Old Enlightenment view of reason, we have yet to digest the full implications of what we already know:

It should come as no surprise then that the ideas that our embodied brains come up with depend in large measure on the peculiarities of human anatomy in general and on the way we, as human beings, function on our planet and with each other. This is not surprising when discussed in vague abstractions, but it is remarkable in detail: even our ideas of morality and politics are embodied in this rich way—those ideas are created and carried out not merely by the neural anatomy and connectivity of our brains, but also by the ways we function bodily in the physical and social world.⁷²

It follows from this rich embodiment that we cannot be expected to alter people’s moral and political views at will, in response to compelling argument alone, because what we experience to be the compellingness of an argument is always bound up with our broader social and physical functioning as

⁶⁶ Ibid., pg. 239.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pg. 126.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pg. 113.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pg. 125.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pg. 1.

⁷¹ Ibid., pg. 55.

⁷² Ibid., pg. 10.

embodied organisms.⁷³ Our political attitudes emerge out of synaptically encoded moral narratives, which possess a dramatic structure comprised of heroes, villains, victims, helpers, and so forth. And this is in turn undergirded by an emotional structure which binds the dramatic structure to positive and negative emotional circuitry. Feelings like anger, fear, and relief are responses to developments within the dramatic structure—such as villainous action, battle, and victory.⁷⁴ This is why we feel elated upon the victory of our favored political candidate and depressed upon his defeat. The candidate's fate has been neurally integrated with our dopamine circuitry, which is activated by his victory and suppressed by his defeat.⁷⁵ We are not born with these narratives, but their foundations become physically encoded in our brains quickly enough and constitute the lenses through which we understand both others and ourselves.⁷⁶ We may sometimes change our choice of political candidate. But the “deep narratives” that fuel our choices are more recalcitrant to change.⁷⁷ For these have been synaptically encrypted into our physiology, and so cannot be changed absent a transformation in our broader brain structure.⁷⁸ To the extent a change is possible, this will be, not because arguments have changed our minds, but because language has changed our brains, because the right words and images have strengthened some synaptic connections while weakening others to the point that a measure of political realignment is possible.⁷⁹

Liberals wonder how so many economically struggling conservatives are so willing to vote against their rational self-interest. But the “New Enlightenment” that Lakoff advocates challenges the primacy of the self-interest assumed by the classical economic and political theories.⁸⁰ Although all organisms are indeed “self-maintaining” in that they “have to breathe, move, eat, avoid being harmed or killed, and so on,”⁸¹ this organismic self-maintenance is not the same thing as “having as many goodies as possible.” Liberals sometimes associate conservatism with raw egoism. But self-interest is not a self-contained motivation and is rather defined by the broader metaphorical moral system of which it is one part.⁸² If conservatives celebrate the free pursuit of economic gain, this is in the name of Strict Father morality. For that pursuit has been conceptualized as a means of cultivating “moral strength,” the self-reliance and

⁷³ Ibid., pg. 10.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pg. 93.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pg. 28.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pg. 33.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pg. 38.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pg. 59.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pg. 231.

⁸⁰ Lakoff, *Political Mind*, pg. 203

⁸¹ Ibid., pg. 204.

⁸² Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, pg. 95.

self-discipline that uphold authority against external and internal evils.⁸³ Economic self-interest is pursued, not out of any culturally neutral egoism, but as a sign of and reward for having upheld a broader moral orientation toward the world.⁸⁴ The same can be said of Nurturant Parent morality. If nurturers are sometimes occupied with nurturing themselves, this is no mere egoistic self-indulgence, but the *sine qua non* of nurturing others.⁸⁵ The development of human potential, in oneself and others, is a moral calling within Nurturant Parent morality.⁸⁶ And this is what gives the self-interest of liberals its definition.⁸⁷

All this, argues Lakoff, is something that conservatives appreciate intuitively. Being more constrained by the Old Enlightenment, the rationalistic Left is propelled toward point-by-point debate of concrete utilities. By contrast, conservatives have a better sense of the holistic manner in which human brains actually function, and so they are more deeply attuned to the pre-rational role played by moral metaphor and narrative⁸⁸: “Conservatives are fond of suggesting that liberals don’t understand what they say, that they just don’t get it. The conservatives are right.”⁸⁹ In this regard, Lakoff adopts what are some classic conservative tenets. Amy Wax writes:

Those who think culture matters are partial to a view of human motivation, choice, personality, and moral life that makes "enlightened" intellectuals uneasy. The rich picture of human motivation embraced by conservative traditionalists like Oakeshott and Burke necessarily resists systematic description. These thinkers challenge a materialist view that sees persons as "rational actors" who are motivated by self-interest and who operate through reasoned calculation. Rather, they observe that people are often moved by values, emotions, ideologies, moral expectations, and group identity, and sometimes take decisions that appear self-defeating, unpredictable, and at odds with rational deliberation.⁹⁰

But while Lakoff appears to agree with conservatives’ psychological premises, he does not accept that these ultimately redound to the conservative cause. Human beings may not always be motivated by rational self-interest. But there is in fact such a thing as our rational self-interest, and Strict Father morality is disconnected from it. As we saw, Strict Father morality does not “keep one in direct touch with human flourishing at the most basic level of experience.” It “gives priority to forms of metaphorical morality...over experiential morality” and so is uprooted from “the nonmetaphorical, literal, directly experienced foundation of all metaphorical moral systems.” Notwithstanding the often irrational, fact-

⁸³ Ibid., pg. 35.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pg. 68

⁸⁵ Ibid., pgs. 119, 122

⁸⁶ Ibid., pg. 137

⁸⁷ Ibid., pg. 131

⁸⁸ Lakoff, *Political Mind*, pg. 12.

⁸⁹ Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, pg. 24.

⁹⁰ Amy L. Wax, *The Conservative’s Dilemma: Traditional Institutions, Social Change, and Same-Sex Marriage*, 42 San Diego L. Rev. 1059, 1091-92 (2005).

insensitive nature of human beings, progressive values are the more rational, fact-sensitive ones. But the human mind being what it is, these values cannot be directly propagated by strictly rational means, through facts and arguments alone, and rather require that liberals cultivate *the kind of idealism that would equip one to recognize the facts*, the kind of metaphorical moral system that can direct us to, or at least coincide with, the non-metaphorical foundations of human flourishing. Like Kahan's expressive moderation, Lakoff's New Enlightenment represents an effort to discover the mechanisms through which our rationalistic ideals can accommodate the ineluctably irrational, anthropocentric aspects of ourselves. In the one case as in the other, the solution is not to repudiate reason wholesale but to embrace a more realistic and sophisticated understanding of what constrains reason and adapt reason accordingly.

While conservatives have a superior instinctive appreciation for the holistic, idealistic character of political thinking, Lakoff hopes that progressives can achieve a theoretical understanding of it and then play the game as it must be played and has always been played. If progressives are to prevail, this will be by deploying "language, images, and narratives that positively activate the progressive worldview, while acting negatively to inhibit the effect of the conservative worldview."⁹¹ Rather than fixating on head-to-head arguments about the logical minutiae of contested questions, progressives can gradually nudge biconceptuals toward progressivism by first talking to them about issues where they are already progressive—for example, progressive religious values like caring for the poor or progressive community values like helping neighbors—in order to sow the synaptic seeds for a broader progressivism.⁹²

Manipulative though it may seem, this political strategy is not a betrayal of the Enlightenment. In its broadest sense, Enlightenment means respect for facts. And it is a fact that our embodied reason is "shaped by our bodies and brains and interactions in the real world," and that our conscious thinking is "shaped by the vast and invisible realm of neural circuitry not accessible to consciousness."⁹³ Being part of the "permanent furniture of our brains," narrative and metaphor cannot be erased and replaced by "cold, hard reason." We can, however, become more aware of them, better able to make intelligent use of them.⁹⁴ The New Enlightenment is simply a rational response to discoveries that could not have been anticipated in the Eighteenth Century, and is ultimately consistent with the Enlightenment's original promise.

⁹¹ Lakoff, *Political Mind*, pg. 120.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pg. 114.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 13.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 36.

3. The New Enlightenment

But does the New Enlightenment truly redound to the liberal cause? Or does liberals' understanding of its implications remain distorted by Old Enlightenment preconceptions—just like Kahan's sophistication about cognitive illiberalism remains distorted by his rationalism. As we will now begin to see, the nature of this distortion is revealed by conservative claims of cultural oppression, which embody the ultimate in sophistication that is thus far lacking in the New Enlightenment.

What Mooney designates as the “amygdala theory of conservatism” comports with the mutation counter-narrative in important respects. As we have seen, the buffered identity emerges from out of the porous one through the suppression of the wilder instinctual and affective oscillations of the pre-modern identity, with its immediate fear responses to an uncertain, often hostile environment. And conservatives' greater “skin conductance” and more pronounced “startle reflexes” can be understood as the modern residue of this pre-modern personality structure, a personality structure that, responding to what Elias calls “the incurable unrest, the perpetual proximity of danger, the whole atmosphere of this unpredictable and insecure life,” was very often in the grip of immediate fear responses. The amygdala theory of conservatism therefore reveals the biological substratum, not only of conservative (and liberal) thinking, but also of the historical changes in the overall human make-up chronicled by the mutation counter-narrative. These changes, we have come to understand, involved the progressive imposition of a new discipline, and this now turns out to be the disciplining of the amygdala by the ACC. We cannot travel back in time to medieval Europe in order to measure its amygdalas against our own, of course, but the amygdala theory of conservatism provides concrete physiological correlates for what I have described as the progressive buffering of human agency. We might say that the mutation counter-narrative historicizes the amygdala theory of conservatism, just as the amygdala theory of conservatism neurologizes the mutation counter-narrative.

This is why the New Enlightenment can illuminate and be illuminated by conservative claims of cultural oppression. As saw in an earlier chapter, Sean Hannity charges that liberals are prepared to bring “the full force” of their “rhetorical firepower” to bear in their attacks against conservatives. And the New Enlightenment suggests that the metaphor of “firepower” reflects an accurate intuitive appreciation of the neurological stakes, where the usual distinctions between force and persuasion are dissolved. Mooney criticizes the traditional Enlightenment view that beliefs are “somehow disembodied, suspended above us in the ether.” Having misconstrued the nature of belief in this way, we imagine “all you have to do is flip up the right bit of correct information and wrong beliefs will dispel, like bursting a soap bubble.” But the truth is that our “[b]eliefs are *physical*,” and that “[t]o attack them is like attacking one part of a

person's anatomy, almost like pricking his or her skin (or worse)."⁹⁵ The New Enlightenment therefore endows conservative claims of cultural oppression with a new credibility. If liberals are quick to dismiss the charge that they are engaged in an "assault" against conservatives and their values, this can only be because they remain under the spell of the Old Enlightenment, imagining that beliefs are "suspended above us in the ether" and therefore immune from assault. Frank writes that when conservatives complain of their "persecution" by liberals, what they actually mean here is "not imprisonment or excommunication or disenfranchisement, but criticism," like editorials expressing disagreement with them.⁹⁶ But *understood naturalistically*, this "criticism" can be a rather intrusive thing, an endless pricking away at the selves of conservatives. If Lakoff is to be believed, it consists in nothing less than an attempt to erode the synaptic strength of the neural connections that underpin Strict Father morality. And this surely qualifies as a kind of "assault."

Addressing a Hillsdale College audience on whether conservatives can "reclaim the culture," Goldberg concluded his remarks by advising his audience of young conservatives:

Be happy...right. There is nothing, nothing that pisses off the Left more than a happy conservative. It violates all the things that they believe in...The place where liberals win the most, where the Left wins the most, is at the level of claiming that to be a truly realized and happy and joyous person you have to be on the Left. And the amazing reality is how utterly untrue that is.⁹⁷

Liberals will surely dispute that the misery of conservatives figures so prominently in their agenda. What pisses them off, they will retort, is racial, sexual, and economic inequality, not the possibility of joyous conservatives. And where they have prevailed, this has been by offering solutions to these problems, not by marketing liberalism as a superior form of therapy, as Goldberg seems to be suggesting. But the New Enlightenment places Goldberg's allegation in a new light, as a premonition of liberalism's ultimate aims. Even if happy conservatives are there to be found today, the victory of liberalism would mean the unraveling of the social structures that support conservatives' synaptic make-ups. And to deactivate the latter is also to deactivate those persons who are constituted from out of them, conservatives. This may not be tantamount to imprisonment or disenfranchisement. But understood naturalistically, it is an attack on the very foundations of the self. And this cannot make for a happy conservative. Liberals may not actively contemplate the misery of conservatives. But their project of synaptic rewiring has that misery as its corollary, as a hopeful sign that the synaptic networks of conservatives are becoming devitalized.

⁹⁵ Mooney, *Republican Brain*, pg. 37.

⁹⁶ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2005), pg. 213.

⁹⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3WLIHN6Q8k>

This is why Goldberg can urge happiness upon conservatives as a kind of political act, because he is implicitly operating within the framework of the New Enlightenment.

Lakoff is surely correct that organismic self-maintenance is not the same thing as the rational self-interest of *homo economicus*. But the requirements of organismic self-maintenance go well beyond mere breathing, eating, and death-avoidance and encompass the preservation of the neural patterns that uphold our hero-systems and identities. As we have seen, liberals will dismiss these as merely “symbolic” concerns. But Becker observes:

Anthropologists have long known that when a tribe of people lose the feeling that their way of life is worth-while they may stop reproducing, or in large numbers simply lie down and die beside streams full of fish. Food is not the primary nourishment of man, strange as that may sound to some ethological faddists.⁹⁸

[S]hort of natural catastrophe, the only time life grinds to a halt or explodes in anarchy and chaos, is when a culture falls down on its job of constructing a meaningful hero-system for its members. The depopulation of Melanesia earlier in this century, as well as the loss of interest by the Marquesan Islanders in having children, did not puzzle anthropologists: in the face of inroads from white traders and missionaries upon everything that gave them a sense of value, the islanders simply gave up.⁹⁹

These are clearly extreme cases. Culturally oppressed though they may be, conservatives are not about to stop reproducing and lie down to die besides streams full of fish. Nevertheless, the anthropological record serves to blur the neat lines that liberals would draw between the merely symbolic and the genuinely substantive, showing us the ways in which they are intertwined. And this is consistent with the New Enlightenment. Mooney writes:

If we have strong emotional convictions about something, then these convictions must be thought of as an actual physical part of our brains, residing not in any individual brain cell (or neuron) but rather in the complex connections between them, and the pattern of neural activation that has occurred so many times before, and will occur again. The more we activate a particular series of connections, the more powerful it becomes. It grows more and more a part of us, like the ability to play guitar or juggle a soccer ball.¹⁰⁰

This neural activation is why conservative claims of cultural oppression are sincere rather than contrived. For what liberals would dismiss as conservatives’ “vague premonitions of erosion or unraveling” of some ethereal social fiber is, translated into non-anthropocentric terms, the gradual unraveling of a neurologically encoded heroic narrative, the erosion of its synaptic strength at the hands of a hostile cultural environment that fails to activate, and may consistently work to de-activate, the synaptic connections that underpin conservatives’ identities and hero-system, which are as much a part of them

⁹⁸ Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), pg. 76.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 112

¹⁰⁰ Mooney, *Republican Brain*, pg. 36.

as are their limbs and organs. Such harms may not be clearly visible and incontestable, like the harms of famine or disease. But this does not make them any less “real” in the context of the sophisticated scientific understanding of human nature to which Lakoff and presumably all liberals aspire.

While liberals’ commitment to non-anthropocentricity prevents them from accepting Strict Father morality’s concerns about “Moral Order” at face value, it also provides them with an alternative language in which those concerns can be *reconceptualized non-anthropocentrically*. For grievances that are easily dismissed as “merely symbolic” are, neurologically speaking, as substantive as anything else. The *ideals* of Strict Father morality may be dismissed as subjective and metaphorical. But that morality *itself*—*qua* neurological system integrated into embodied organisms—cannot be similarly characterized. The highest ideals of Strict Father morality may not track human flourishing in the direct sense that Lakoff associates with Nurturant Parent morality. But the *frustration* of Strict Father morality can indeed have consequences for some human beings’ flourishing. Lakoff maintains that Strict Father morality prioritizes metaphorical morality over experiential morality. But Strict Father and Nurturant Parent moralities are equally “experiential” at this most basic of levels, which is what liberals choose to overlook. Frank writes that while devotees of the conservative backlash “might get the facts wrong, they get the subjective experience right.”¹⁰¹ This is an Old Enlightenment distinction, however, because the New Enlightenment tells us that the subjective experience is correlated with certain facts that are just as tangible as the economic realities that liberals deem to be uniquely “substantive.” This is why the New Enlightenment lends a certain credibility to conservative claims of cultural oppression that was unavailable under the old one.

If Mooney and Lakoff do not recognize this, this is because their analysis is compromised by the epistemological framework, which always militates against a genuine understanding of conservative claims of cultural oppression. Mooney casts the “alternative reality on the right” and conservatives’ “counterexpertise to thwart mainstream knowledge” as expedients in the service of some general need to promote “belief affirmation and ideological activation.” But these phenomena are more profoundly understood as specific *responses* to the prestige of the buffered identity, to the particular social and cultural conditions under which this identity is neutrally activated. They are the assertion of one cosmological orientation against another—not an ontologically primordial refusal of certain “disinterested representations,” but a protest against certain modes of “nonexplicit engagement with the world,” against certain ways of “function[ing] bodily in the physical and social world,” as Lakoff says.

¹⁰¹ Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, pg. 137.

Conservative counterexpertise exists to advance, not only deeply held beliefs, but also something deeper than deeply held beliefs.

While Mooney depicts conservatives' need for "ideological activation" as a special defensiveness vis-à-vis cherished convictions, this activation is ultimately the defense of one affective-instinctual structure against the imposition of another. It is the activation, not only of a belief-system, but of a hero-system, of the entire organism in opposition to an ambient culture that threatens to undermine it. Fixating as he does upon the "epistemological fragment of man," Mooney must trivialize a cosmological grievance and physiological protest against the civilizing process as just an angry, petulant defensiveness vis-à-vis certain consoling dogmas. However, conservatives' larger amygdala is politically relevant, not only because it produces a higher need for closure, but because those amygdalas are being targeted by the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. These may be second-nature to and unnoticed by those with more gray matter in the ACC. But they are experienced as an alien imposition by others—a transgression against human nature's default setting. Hence Harris's ornery American, whose protests must be dismissed by those lacking this ultimate in sophistication.

Sophisticated though they may be, Mooney and Lakoff both fail to achieve the ultimate in sophistication because they both overlook *the supra-epistemological implications* of a naturalistic, neurologized political science—its implications for what it is a conflict, not only between rival systems of belief-formation, but more primordially between rival human make-ups of which these belief-systems are expressions. Though Mooney ostensibly follows Elias in contextualizing "changes of ideas and forms of cogitation" within broader changes of the "overall human make-up," his scientistic ethnocentrism propels him to reduce the latter to the status of an *explanation* for the former. And so he cannot acknowledge it as the actual subject matter of political controversy. Liberal proponents of the New Enlightenment may have repudiated the Old Enlightenment view of reason. But just like Kahan, they retain the Old Enlightenment view *of man* as first and foremost a reasoning being, as an epistemological subject. And this is why they fail to understand the conservatives who see people very differently, who see what lies underneath the epistemological fragment of man.

* * *

As we saw in Chapter 2, Mike Gallagher claims to have studied liberals the way Jane Goodall studied chimpanzees, in order to meticulously document all the things that liberals love to hate. And this comparison is fully consistent with the New Enlightenment. Drew Westen writes:

The differences between the human brain and the brains of our primitive ancestors (and many contemporary animals) lie mostly in addition to the original brain structures, which continue to guide emotion, motivation, and learning. This fact led Charles Darwin to place some species on our family tree whom we might consider rather poor relations. It led Sigmund Freud, a neurologist by training, to view our extraordinary capacities to love, create, and understand ourselves and the universe as a thin veneer—as we will see, only a few millimeters thick—over primitive structures that motivate our most extraordinary achievements and our most “inhuman”—that is, distinctively human—atrocities.¹⁰²

The capacity for rational judgment evolved to augment, not replace, evolutionarily older motivational systems. The emotional systems of simpler organisms are “decision-making” systems that initiate approach, avoidance, fight, or flight. The neural circuits activated during complex human decision making do not function independently of these more primitive systems. Freud analogized reason to a hapless rider on a horse, who does his best to channel and control the large beast—pulling it this way and tugging it that way—but ultimately, the power resides in the horse, not the rider. The rider could always get off, but he wouldn’t get very far on foot.¹⁰³

Freud had some good reasons to fixate on instinct theory. As a neurologist, he understood well that the cerebral cortex that was responsible for the heights of human accomplishment evolved atop some seedy structures, whose primitive demands it could only cover like cheap neural perfume.¹⁰⁴

Conservatives’ refusal to accept liberalism at face value originates in the visceral intuition that liberalism is merely “cheap neural perfume,” because its ostensibly universalistic ideals have as their unacknowledged subtext the privileging of some human make-ups over others, the self-perpetuation of some neurological constitutions at the expense of the alternatives. For liberals’ ultimate goal is, as Lakoff says, to deploy “language, images, and narratives that positively activate the progressive worldview, while acting negatively to inhibit the effect of the conservative worldview.” And this is the concrete, biological bottom line in relation to which liberals’ high ideals seem like cheap neural perfume. If conservatives decline to recognize liberals as disinterested seekers of all that is true, good, and beautiful, this is because that truth, goodness, and beauty are “only a few millimeters thick,” merely epiphenomena of liberals’ organismic self-maintenance and desire to promote a culture that supports it—the root cause of conservatives’ cultural oppression.

C.S. Lewis argued that naturalism undermines the very possibility of truth because our judgments instantly lose all meaning the moment we believe that they can be explained “without remainder, as the result of irrational causes.” For “[w]hen you know that what the other man is saying is wholly due to

¹⁰² Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), pg. 51.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pg. 62-63.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pg. 80.

his complexes or to a bit of bone pressing on his brain, you cease to attach any importance to it.”¹⁰⁵ This conclusion will be disputed by many philosophers. But we need not enter these contentious theoretical waters in order to draw out another, more modest implication of naturalism. And this is that someone who elected to conceptualize the traditional contest of political ideologies naturalistically, in terms of the “neurological advantages” which these ideologies conferred on different groups of people, and on this basis erected a new, second-order political ideology to complement his initial first-order concerns, would *not* just be airing a vague cultural grievance—because that grievance would be as “substantive” as they come. And this is the inner meaning of conservative claims of cultural oppression, whose *ad hominem* temper reflects conservatives’ intuitive appreciation for the physiological embeddedness of political ideologies.

Richard Rorty writes that Wittgenstein “naturalizes mind and language by making all questions about the relation of either to the rest of the universe *casual* questions, as opposed to questions about the adequacy of representation.”¹⁰⁶ And conservative claimants of cultural oppression are in their deepest instincts practical Wittgensteinians. They concern themselves, not with the adequacy of liberal representations about truth and justice, but with these representations’ causal effect on conservatives and the conservative culture. Liberals believe they “stick to the issues.” But what appear like discrete issues are unconsciously bound up with the promotion of certain human make-ups to the detriment of others. Liberal tolerance conceals this from itself, conceals the biological bottom line, which on a very primitive yet very real level eviscerates much of what liberals believe distinguishes them from conservatives. Every animal, writes Nietzsche, “instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can expend all its strength and achieve its maximal feeling of power.” And every animal “abhors, just as instinctively and with a subtlety of discernment that is ‘higher than all reason,’ every kind of intrusion or hindrance that obstructs or could obstruct this path to the optimum.”¹⁰⁷ This is the underlying symmetry to which conservatives but not liberals are viscerally attuned, the root of the “liberal hypocrisy” that is an ever-present fact for conservatives. If the latter have difficulty articulating the nature of this hypocrisy, and so present themselves as unreasonable, this is because they detect it with a “subtlety of discernment that is ‘higher than all reason.’”

¹⁰⁵Qt. in Stephen D. Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pg. 200.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), pg. 15.

¹⁰⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pg. 107 (Essay 3, Sec. 7).

One major irony of conservative claims of cultural oppression is that while conservatives may formally oppose naturalism as the faithlessness of secular humanists, their very resentment toward those secular humanists expresses an intuitive *naturalistic* appraisal of political life. And one major irony of liberalism, mirroring that conservatism, is that while liberals officially uphold the scientific worldview, they *cannot take their naturalism to its logical conclusion*, to the point where it would reveal the symmetries that conservatives appreciate intuitively. Where more Platonically-minded liberals perceive reasoned deliberation in pursuit of the good, conservatives intuit synaptic activation or de-activation. This is not how they put it to either themselves or to others, of course, but the intuition is implicit in their basic, pre-reflective, pre-theorized sense of their relationship to liberals. Gallagher's reduction of liberals to a tribe of chimps is no idle cheap shot, but a stark illustration of how conservatives viscerally process political discourse. This is exactly what could be expected to follow from the mutation counter-narrative. Given their less "advanced" position along the civilizing process, conservatives are animated by a more visceral appreciation for the continuities between the animal and the human and accordingly process the human world in more animalistic terms. And given their *more* "advanced" position along that process, liberals are more disposed to *deny* the animal. As we saw, this denial is a convention of the peculiarly courtly rationality, and liberals will uphold this inheritance even when it is inconsistent with their scientific worldview.

This differential positioning is the reason why liberals and conservatives are destined to talk past one another, why conservatives are always detecting some kind of covert sectarianism lurking behind liberals' claims to pluralism and tolerance, and why liberals are always incredulous before these accusations. Macedo concedes that there is grain of truth in the argument that the limited, merely civic liberalism he defends cannot really be distinguished from a comprehensive liberalism that seeks to inculcate liberalism as a personal, and not merely civic, ideal. Macedo defends "equal liberty, critical independence, an awareness of the world and its operations, and the ability to reflect on one's particular convictions and aims for the sake of doing justice"¹⁰⁸ on merely civic grounds, as requirements of good citizenship. But he recognizes that these civic ideals can carry implications for people's private lives as well. Merely civic arguments for religious toleration, for example, will eventually influence religion itself, modifying its theological content in a non-fundamentalist direction. In the real world, the practice of civic tolerance will stimulate many people to think autonomously about their ultimate convictions, even if civic liberalism does not official endorse this as an ultimate ideal of human flourishing. For these reasons,

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pg. 239.

Macedo acknowledges that “some of the distinctions that separate a civic liberalism from a comprehensive liberalism are fairly subtle.”¹⁰⁹ For liberalism can be “neutral with respect to ideals of life as a whole only in the very limited sense of not relying on the justifiability of any particular comprehensive ideal or view of the whole truth.”¹¹⁰ It cannot guarantee a level playing field for all conceptions of the good, which a civic liberalism will invariably advantage or disadvantage in one way or another. Nevertheless, Macedo rejects the suggestion that civic liberalism is just comprehensive liberalism in disguise, and that the latter is simply more candid about the actual scope of its ambitions. Though subtle, the distinction between the two liberalisms is real, because “political liberalism stands for a measure of restraint that would be unnatural for one committed to a vision of the good life as a whole informed by autonomy or individuality.”¹¹¹ Civic liberalism may not be neutral in its impact, but that impact is nevertheless limited by its neutral principles, which are for this reason real.

Macedo’s distinction between civic and comprehensive liberalisms may be perfectly sound as a conceptual matter and may indeed impose some restraints on what government actors can say and do to promote the liberal virtues. But the distinction may also carry little “cash value” at the neurological level, where some people’s synaptic networks may not be such as to support the distinction between critical thinking *qua* requirement of good citizenship and critical thinking *qua* highest good. This is why fundamentalists believe that liberal educators covertly promote “secular humanism” even when these educators claim that the critical thinking they seek to instill is ideologically neutral. If the distinction between the two liberalisms can seem genuine to liberals, this may be only because their more intellectualized and excarnated cosmological orientation endows the distinction with a viscerally felt reality that is inaccessible to others—whose physiologically embodied identities do not dispose them toward this kind of abstraction, do not dispose them to distinguish the issue of justifications from the issue of ultimate impact. And so the “subtlety” of Macedo’s distinctions cannot but strike many conservatives as disingenuous. The point is not simply that civic (or political) liberalism and comprehensive liberalism converge upon one another in many of their long-term *effects*, as Macedo and Rawls both recognize, but that the two liberalisms are for many conservatives indistinguishable in their *meaning*. While civic or political liberalism may entail a measure of restraint that would be unnatural to a comprehensive liberalism, that restraint will scarcely be appreciated by those who feel only the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pg. 239.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pg. 179.

¹¹¹ Ibid., pg. 175.

frustration of their cosmological orientation, the imposition of the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity against their default human dispositions.

Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson write that “any claim fails to respect reciprocity if it imposes a requirement on other citizens to adopt one’s sectarian way of life as a condition of gaining access to the moral understanding that is essential to judging the validity of one’s moral claims.”¹¹² But the question posed by conservative claims of cultural oppression is whether the distinction between the sectarian and the non-sectarian might itself be inescapably sectarian, because how we define a “way of life” is itself a function of our “way of life” *qua* biological constitution. As we saw in a previous section, liberals conceptualize a “way of life” in more intellectualized, excarnated terms, as, say, a “comprehensive conception of the good.” But conservatives understand it in a less intellectualized, more enfleshed fashion, as one’s mode of nonexplicit engagement with the world. Liberals conceptualize a worldview as “in the head”—as a set of ideas, opinions, convictions, and so forth. But being more naturalistic and animalistic, conservatives experience what they may *call* a “worldview” as “the ways we function bodily in the physical and social world,” to borrow from Lakoff. Against this backdrop, liberals’ more rationalistic definition of sectarianism—as a certain form of intellectual justification—must be dismissed as a sectarian ruse, because it expresses what is but *one way* of functioning bodily in the physical and social world.

However they be defended philosophically, liberal political preferences subserve what are, *neurologically speaking*, sectarian goods, subserve certain kinds of synaptically encoded heroic narratives to the exclusion of others. And this is precisely why the liberal may “have to concede that he has a great many more enemies (real enemies – people who will suffer under a liberal dispensation) than he has usually pretended to have,” as Waldron says. Lakoff observes that the main battlefield of the culture wars is the brain itself,¹¹³ and all the distinctions on whose basis liberals think themselves non-sectarian dissolve at this most primitive yet eminently real of levels. Yet this never makes its way into liberals’ assessment of the equities. And this is why conservatives are forever unimpressed by the conceptual refinement of liberals’ webs of syllogism and dismiss that refinement as prejudice cloaked in rational-sounding rhetoric. As we saw, Smith charges that liberals’ “artificial” conception of harm—which discounts psychic and communal harm—functions to conceal real injuries and marginalize some conceptions of the good life. And this conception qualifies as artificial because it reflects liberalism

¹¹² Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pg. 57.

¹¹³ Lakoff, *Political Mind*, pg. 1.

refusal to take its naturalism to its logical conclusion, to the point where it would reveal the basic symmetries that conservatives appreciate intuitively.

* * *

Defenders of the harm-principle do not deny that applying it can involve some difficult judgments. Jeremy Feinberg, the harm principle's most prominent expounder in our time, writes that "any legal system determined to 'minimize harm' must incorporate judgments of the comparative importance of interests of different kinds so that it can pronounce 'unjustified' the invasion of one person's interest of high priority done to protect another person's interest of low priority."¹¹⁴ Our interests must therefore be classed according to their level of vitality, and an interest qualifies as more vital to the degree it is necessary to the success of an individual's "whole interest network."¹¹⁵ Only on this basis can we proceed to "minimize" harm.

Consistently with this, Feinberg distinguishes between mere hurts and actual harms. While hurts are genuine evils to be avoided, they are not in themselves cognizable under the harm principle. For something can qualify as a harm only insofar as it prevents us from pursuing some interest.¹¹⁶ And mere hurts do not do this. "Unhappy mental states" such as "unpleasant sensations (evil smells, grating noises), transitory disappointments, wounded pride, hurt feelings, aroused anger, shocked sensibility, alarm, disgust, frustration, impatience, restlessness, acute boredom, irritation, embarrassment, feelings of guilt and shame, physical pain (at a readily tolerable level), bodily discomfort, and many more"¹¹⁷ do not, under normal circumstances, disable our broader interest network. And so they do not qualify as harms that the state may undertake to prevent under the harm principle. Even our strong wants, standing alone, are insufficient to create an interest whose frustration constitutes a legally actionable harm. The frustration of these wants may create powerful feelings of disappointment. But our interests are defined, not by subjective feelings of disappointment, but by a good's objective instrumental value for our whole network of interests.¹¹⁸

Feinberg defends liberty in the same way. The suppression of liberty, the diminution of our options, is not in itself a harm if the options in question were not ones we intended to pursue.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others* (Oxford University Press, 1984), pg. 35.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 205.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 48.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 45.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 42.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 212.

Nevertheless, liberty qualifies as “a basic welfare interest”¹²⁰ encompassed by the harm principle. And this is because it constitutes a vital “breathing space” that assures us of alternative options should our desires or circumstances change.¹²¹ Liberty is a “cushion” against possible future invasions of our welfare interests. And so we all possess a derivative interest in maintaining more of it than we can presently make use of,¹²² an interest in having as many open options as possible with respect to various kinds of action, omission, and possession.¹²³ Just like harm, liberty can be quantified according to its relationship to our “whole interest network.” For options may be more or less “fecund.” More fecund options lead to more future options, and less fecund options lead to fewer future options. Our options can therefore be compared to the various switches that permit trains to access railroad tracks within an interlocking maze of tracks. Like a railroad track intersection, the importance of an option is to be measured by how many further options it facilitates.¹²⁴ And this can guide us when trade-offs between the liberties of different individuals need to be implemented.

The New Enlightenment problematizes this analysis, however. What if the “railroad tracks” in question refer, not to any easily describable courses of action to be potentially traversed by clearly identifiable individuals, but to the more obscure “neurological tracks” that might be traversed within the brains of those individuals? It might then turn out that a liberal social order is abrogating the liberty of conservatives, not because they are prevented from attending church or saluting the flag, but because it inhibits the neurological activity that would render these and other activities fully meaningful. If the liberal elites’ conception of harm is “artificial,” this is because a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of human neurology might ambiguate what liberals imagine is a fairly clear line between mere hurts and genuine harms. What can be verbally dismissed as a mere hurt—including political, social, and cultural hurts—could well constitute a serious impediment to our entire interest network thus understood. Our articulated assessments of what does and does not meaningfully abrogate the liberty of individuals may very poorly track the conditions of neurological liberty. But these are, for physiologically embodied agents such as we are, as important as anything could be.

Yet this is a truth to which the “children of the Enlightenment” appear inured. As we observed with Lakoff, it is easier to accept the New Enlightenment on a theoretical level than to recognize its potential social and political implications. And this blindness is in fact an intrinsic feature of liberalism, a

¹²⁰ Ibid., pg. 206.

¹²¹ Ibid., pg. 212.

¹²² Ibid., pg. 207.

¹²³ Ibid., pg. 207.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pg. 208.

product of its Old Enlightenment lineage. Describing the basic sensibilities of the Enlightenment, Carl Becker's famous *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* explains:

They are citizens of the world, the emancipated ones, looking out upon a universe seemingly brand new because so freshly flooded with light, a universe in which everything worth attending to is visible, and everything visible is seen to be unblurred and wonderfully simple after all, and evidently intelligible to the human mind—the mind of Philosophers.¹²⁵

They were out for the cold facts, out to spoil the game of the mystery-mongers. That species of enthusiasm was indeed to be banned; but only to be replaced by an enthusiasm, however well concealed beneath an outward calm, for the simple truth of things. Knowing beforehand that the truth would make them free, they were on the lookout for a special brand of truth, a truth that would be on their side, a truth they could make use of in their business. Some sure instinct warned them that it would be dangerous to know too much, that “to comprehend all is to pardon all.” They were too recently emancipated from errors to regard error with detachment, too eager to spread the light to enjoy the indolent luxury of the suspended judgment.¹²⁶

This Enlightenment legacy remains with us and is the reason why liberals cannot take their naturalism to its logical conclusion—to the point where conservative claims of cultural oppression become intelligible, to the point that the ideals of liberalism can be meaningfully appropriated by conservatism. Today's liberals are, as in the Eighteenth Century, “out to spoil the game of the mystery-mongers.” But as “children of the Enlightenment” they are warned by “some sure instinct” that “it would be dangerous to know too much.” To take naturalism to its logical conclusion is to acknowledge the layer of human experience that dissolves liberalism's dichotomy between the “merely symbolic” and our “substantive interests,” or between “cultural grievances” and “tangible issues.” But this liberals refuse to see. To “comprehend all is to pardon all,” and as liberals have no interest in pardoning conservative claims of cultural oppression, neither can they afford to comprehend them. Like the philosophers of the 18th Century, they are “on the lookout for a special brand of truth, a truth that would be on their side.” And this is a truth that would vindicate a hero-system, vindicate the buffered distance, which is why liberals must position conservatives as benighted people who, having become mystified by the “merely symbolic,” cannot distinguish between mere hurts and actual harms.

But notwithstanding this special brand of truth, naturalism taken to its logical conclusion reveals that *nothing* is merely symbolic. Westen reports an experiment at the University of Michigan comparing male college students from Northern and Southern states in which an associate of the researcher would “accidentally” bump into the subjects and then walk off into another room without apology, half the time calling out an expletive as well. Northerners displayed virtually no physiological reaction to the incident,

¹²⁵ Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pg. 34.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 42.

but both cortisol and testosterone levels jumped dramatically in the Southern men.¹²⁷ Was the offense here purely symbolic, or did the experiment reveal it to be substantive? Offense to honor might seem like a mere “hurt,” the artifice of a merely metaphorical Strict Father morality (or the Code of the Gentleman), and so like a highly intangible self-indulgence for whose costs the “victim” bears full responsibility. As the saying goes, sticks and stones may break our bones but words (and one should add, mere untoned bumps) will never hurt us. But this piece of common sense psychology is less the product of any genuinely hard-nosed empiricism than of liberalism’s need to preemptively dissolve potential conflict—the 18th century philosophers’ concealed enthusiasm for the “simple truth of things,” their conviction that “everything worth attending to is visible” and that everything visible is “unburned and wonderfully simple after all.” By contrast, the New Enlightenment tells us that much of what is worth attending to is *not* visible, and this must place what seems like the paranoia and conspiracism of some conservatives in a new light.

Michael Savage complains that feminists like Barbara Boxer, Diane Feinstein, and Hillary Clinton seek to monitor “[t]hose dark, subliminal motives lurking behind what you say,” and not only these, but also “your facial expressions and body language, too.”¹²⁸ These accusations may seem like unhinged paranoia—what Hofstadter calls “obscure and ill-directed grievances and frustrations, with elaborate hallucinations about secrets and conspiracies.” But understood at an appropriate level, Savage’s anxieties are fully consistent with the New Enlightenment and its naturalistic sophistication about human beings. As Lakoff says, our conscious thinking is “shaped by the vast and invisible realm of neural circuitry not accessible to consciousness.” And what Savage casts as liberals’ inquisitorial desire to monitor the inner lives of conservatives is the anthropomorphization of something that is transpiring within this invisible realm. The aim of a transformative liberalism being to subtly transform *people*, it is to be expected that the more shadowy, but ultimately deeper, springs of our being would become part of its transformative subject matter. And this is precisely what Savage is sensing.

Westen also reports that an emerging body of research indicates that emotions are contagious, because “when we watch other people do or feel something, neurons became active in the same regions of our brains as if we were doing or feeling those things themselves.”¹²⁹ And this too can go far in explaining conservatives’ visceral sense of cultural oppression. As discussed in Chapter 2, Jay Nordlinger believes that conservatives understand liberals better than liberals understand conservatives, because

¹²⁷ Westen, *Political Brain*, pg. 128-29.

¹²⁸ Michael Savage, *The Savage Nation: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on Our Borders, Language, and Culture* (Plume 2002), pg. 38.

¹²⁹ Westen, *Political Brain*, pg. 288.

whereas liberals “can go a long time without brushing up against someone who’s conservative,” conservatives “are more used to being around liberals, because liberals have dominated everything in our lives.” This must strike liberals as histrionics and hallucination. But the domination Nordlinger is alleging may be transpiring in the “brushing up” itself, in the neurological mirroring described by Weston, which is not unreal simply for being invisible to the naked eye of liberals. While everyone’s emotions are presumably contagious to some degree, the prestige of the buffered distance and the subtraction account may have rendered the direction of neuronal influence asymmetrical in favor of liberalism in many contexts, yielding a form of oppression which has very little to do with how many branches of government Republicans happen to be controlling at the time.

Westen believes that in repeatedly linking the words “values” and “morality” with right-wing positions on sexuality, abortion, war, and guns, Republicans have built their own infrastructure into the brains of progressives. The networks of association underpinning the conservative lexicon have “metastasized their way into the neural tissue of the left.”¹³⁰ But the conservative intuition is that the buffered identity has metastasized its way into *their* neural tissue. Whatever the success of some conservative buzzwords, it is they who are being colonized by the civilizing process, by the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. Hence conservatives’ sense that many Americans have internalized the dictates of the liberal culture in opposition to their own nature and that this “Stockholm Syndrome” threatens to deprive them of the resolve, and indeed the very language, through which to resist liberalism. While liberals are the foremost carriers of the buffered identity in its most advanced iteration, conservatives have internalized that identity to a significant degree. And this is why they must feel perennial besieged by “liberalism,” haunted by the sense that it has usurped something that is properly theirs. For they are struggling against the liberalism that lies within as well as the liberalism which lies without, and it is this that animates their sense of liberalism’s unrelenting imperiousness.

The problem with what Lakoff calls the “Old Enlightenment” is not only that it overlooks the role of moral metaphor and narrative in political deliberation, but that its conception of reason as conscious, literal, logical, universal, unemotional, and disembodied can cause liberals to *radically overestimate their ability to accurately track oppression*, leaving them “sublimely confident,” to borrow from Goldberg, that their conscious categories track everything there is to track. But we may in fact know very little about what actually separates bona fide “experiential” moralities from moralities that “do not keep one in direct touch with human flourishing at the most basic level of experience,” as Lakoff says. Scruton writes that

¹³⁰ Ibid., pg. 190.

the sum of our articulate views is the “shallow part of our being.”¹³¹ And the principles on whose basis liberals distinguish their universalistic tolerance from the sectarian intolerance of conservatives belong to precisely this part of our being, because these principles overlook the totality of man in favor of an “epistemological fragment” of man. Only that which lends itself to the conventions of liberal articulacy will be recognized as real, which is why conservatives are prepared to flout those conventions. Their resistance to the buffered identity may often assume the form of “obscure and ill-directed grievances and frustrations.” But this is no reason to dismiss that resistance as mere histrionics. For this obscurity too follows from the New Enlightenment, reflecting the limits of our conscious reason. “Man, like every living being, thinks continually without knowing it,” writes Nietzsche, and “the thinking that rises to *consciousness* is only the smallest part of all this—the most superficial and worst part—for only this conscious thinking *takes the form of words*...”¹³² Understanding conservative claims of cultural oppression requires looking beyond words in order to see the cosmological orientation that the words articulate, our project here.

Unlike the bumps and invective studied by the Michigan experiment, the general cultural oppression alleged by conservatives does not lend itself to the kind of controlled experimentation that would allow us to rigorously quantify its actual injury. But this epistemological hurdle does not justify peremptorily dismissing the possibility of significant harm. If liberals find themselves tempted toward this dismissiveness, this is because they are, like the eighteenth century philosophers “too eager to spread the light to enjoy the indolent luxury of the suspended judgment,” because they have “an enthusiasm, however well concealed beneath an outward calm, for the simple truth of things.” What conservatives decry as the arrogance of the liberal elites is simply a contemporary expression of this legacy, of the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity.

The simple truth of things for these elites is that their supposed “assault” on conservatives consists in mere words, and not any genuine abrogation of rights. But as we observed with Nietzsche in Chapter 4, “[a]lmost everything we call ‘higher culture’ is based on the spiritualization of *cruelty*, on its becoming more profound.” Cruelty has merely “become more refined,” for while its older forms “offend the new taste,” the “art of wounding and torturing others with words and looks reaches its supreme development in times of corruption.” Perhaps we live in just such times, times in which language and culture can exercise a coercive force that previously required sticks and stones. The First Amendment and

¹³¹ Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), pg. 11.

¹³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pg. 298-99 (Sec. 354).

our entire liberal democratic framework presuppose some distinction between speech and conduct, of course. But we should not naturalize what is a pragmatic distinction into an ontologically primordial one, as though words and conduct addressed themselves to two distinct realms of being one of which exists only in the ether. If one cannot, as Lakoff maintains, understand twenty-first century politics with an eighteenth century understanding of the mind, then perhaps our understanding of political persecution needs to be updated as well. Political persecution as it appears to the naked human eye may in the end have fairly little to do with political persecution as it transpires synaptically—in the “dark, subliminal behavior lurking behind what you say” as Savage says.

To be sure, things like gay marriage, flag-burning, licentious Hollywood movies, a multilateralist foreign policy, and the welfare state do not have an obvious psychologically paralyzing effect upon most conservatives, who notwithstanding their cultural oppression still manage to go about their day-to-day lives and make their way in the world. This is why Macedo can assure us that while the ultimate aims of transformative liberalism, the transformation of *people*, may seem illiberal, its methods are “*gentle* rather than oppressive, influencing people’s deeply held beliefs without coercion or force.”¹³³ But the distinction between the gentle and the coercive may—just like Feinberg’s distinction between hurts and harms—carry less cash value on the neurological level than in the context of everyday “common sense.” If some people are deeply recalcitrant to liberalism’s transformative project—that is, to the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity—then we should expect that the kind of gentleness advocated by Macedo will give rise to a certain diffuse, unappeasable resentment that feels itself eminently justified notwithstanding that it has grave difficulties explaining itself. The ultimate source of the aggrievement is not any unambiguous cases of flagrantly illiberal coercion—the fundamentalist interpretation of conservative claims of cultural oppression—but the cumulative neurological impact of liberal “gentleness,” none of whose precipitants are egregiously illiberal or particularly consequential when considered individually. This diffuse resentment is precisely what animates conservative claims of cultural oppression, which must exaggerate, distort, caricature, and sometimes falsify in order to generate tangible symbolic reference points for grievances which would otherwise lack any linguistic medium whatsoever.

When Ben Shapiro charges that conservatives are being “bullied” by liberals, this is in the same sense that women are bullied by patriarchy. Feminists who protest patriarchy are not necessarily alleging the existence of any calculated backroom conspiracies to keep women down. They are describing, not a

¹³³ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, pg. 137.

plot but what they understand to be a “complex ecology of domination and subjugation,” as Sommers puts it,¹³⁴ which cannot be reduced to some clearly delineated set of discrete transgressions. Naomi Wolfe writes that “[t]he beauty backlash against feminism is no conspiracy, but a million separate individual reflexes...that coalesce into a national mood weighing women down; the backlash is the more oppressive because the source of the suffocation is so diffuse as to be almost invisible.”¹³⁵ And in a similar way, conservatives feel weighed down by a national mood of conservaphobia, suffocated by liberalism through the cumulative effect of “a million separate reflex actions” all serving to reinforce the buffered identity, to activate certain neural make-ups while devitalizing others.

Yet these million separate reflex actions do not enter into liberals’ utilitarian calculus. And the reason is that this calculus has the liberal identity as its unstated premise. Smith observes that immediately after establishing “utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions,” Mill issues the caveat that by this he intends “utility in the largest sense, grounded in the permanent interests of man as a progressive being.” Only what interferes with *these* interests can qualify as a genuine harm, as the loss of genuine freedom.¹³⁶ Mill did not deny his elitism and indeed wrote that “it is hardly necessary to say” that his doctrine “is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties”¹³⁷ and is inapplicable to “those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage.”¹³⁸ But what Mill *could say* can go without saying now actually goes without saying among contemporary liberals, who also take their own sensibilities as the measure of real harm and real freedom. They may not officially reject conservative claims of cultural oppression on the grounds that they do not issue from “progressive beings” like themselves. But this judgment is implicit in the dismissive indignation and peremptory dismissal with which these claims are greeted. Liberals’ descriptive claims about what qualifies as a “real” harm disguise what are surreptitiously prescriptive claims in defense of the kind of person for whom the descriptive claims hold true—progressive beings who, possessing more gray matter in the ACC and smaller amygdalas, could never be seriously perturbed by things like the decay of traditional values. If these harms do not qualify as “real,” this is because those who suffer them have been accorded a lower *social* reality as relics of a barbarian past whose existence cannot be permitted to muddy the clear blue waters of liberalism.

¹³⁴ Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?*, pg. 80-81.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 228.

¹³⁶ Steven D. Smith, *Is the Harm Principle Illiberal?*, 51 Am. J. Juris. 1, 26-28 (2006).

¹³⁷ Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, pg. 144.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 144.

The heavenly vision of the eighteenth century philosophers is precisely what one should expect of a hero-system that disguises itself as the transcendence of all hero-systems. Mooney identifies the “liberal culture” with scientific skepticism. But the mutation counter-narrative reveals that the naturalistic outlook developed, not only as a conception of the world but also as an *ideal of authentic selfhood and properly human dignity*. This is what the “children of the Enlightenment” are ultimately striving to uphold. As Taylor observes, while the practitioners of science view themselves as “motivated fully by epistemic considerations...a big part of the motivation resides in the prestige and admiration surrounding the [scientific] stance itself, with the sense of freedom, power, control, invulnerability, dignity, which it radiates.”¹³⁹ And it is the need to bask in this stance—the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity—that compels liberals to dismiss conservative claims of cultural oppression as contrived. Being inflected by the buffered identity, the Enlightenment’s particular brand of empiricism is not culturally neutral, and was rather crafted in reflection of a hero-system, in order to uphold a set of social meanings that will ratify the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity as essential human nature, the “true self” that lies dormant or suppressed among the unwashed masses. The light with which Becker’s “emancipated ones” understood the world to have been freshly flooded was none other than this, none other than the buffered identity. This identity was never an actual datum of experience, but rather the silent, unquestioned backdrop against which experience, including the meaning of harm, was to be conceptualized, turning everything that falls outside of that identity into the object of scorn, incredulity, and indignation.

Frank writes that the conservative “Backlash” is sustained, not by “the precise metrics of sociology,” but by “contradictions and tautologies and huge, honking errors,” by the “blunt instruments of propaganda.”¹⁴⁰ It reveals that “American conservatism depends for its continued dominance and even for its very existence on people never making certain mental connections about the world, connections that until recently were treated as obvious or self-evident everywhere on the planet.”¹⁴¹ But we have been examining a set of mental connections that liberals refuse to make. And this is because their very identities will not allow it. Liberals may have “Open personalities.” But this personality is necessarily “closed” with respect to its ultimate premise, the supremacy of a particular human type and hero-system. Liberals can dismiss conservative claims of cultural oppression are contrived only because they refuse to

¹³⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 286.

¹⁴⁰ Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, pg. 19.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 248.

recognize aggression which this necessarily involves. With *the buffered identity and its epistemological framework having circumscribed the meaning of liberals' naturalism*, liberals cannot not take that naturalism to its logical conclusion and recognize the epistemological subject as the expression of a supra-epistemological imperative, of a hero-system that comes at the expense of another hero-system. If conservatives are, as Lakoff observes, fond of saying that liberals "just don't get it," it is this which they just don't get.

On one level, the New Enlightenment recognizes the "epistemological fragment" of man to be just that, a fragment. But like Kahan, Mooney and Lakoff understand this fragment as the core in relation to which the rest of man is to be understood. They recognize the irrational in human nature. But they reduce this irrationality to the coefficient of adversity with which the epistemological subject must reckon, and so cannot see it as a reason to move beyond the epistemological framework itself and achieve the ultimate in sophistication. This would be to recognize that the issue is not the epistemological subject but what lies underneath it, not dogma but dopamine, the activation of the neural circuitry that sustains us in our hero-systems. This is what the culturally circumscribed empiricism of liberals keeps them from seeing. They cannot see, with Nietzsche, that:

The body is a great intelligence, a multiplicity with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a herdsman.

Your little intelligence, my bother, which you call 'spirit', is also an instrument of your body, a little instrument and toy of your great intelligence.

You say 'I' and you are proud of this word. But greater than this – although you will not believe in it – is your body and its great intelligence, which does not say 'I' but performs 'I'.

What the sense feels, what the spirit perceives, is never an end in itself. But sense and spirit would like to persuade you that they are the end of all things: they are as vain as that.

Sense and spirit are instruments and toys: behind them still lies the Self. The self seeks with the eyes of sense; it listens too with the ears of spirit.

The Self is always listening and seeking: it compares subdues, conquers, destroys. It rules and is also the Ego's ruler.

Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, stands a mighty commander, an unknown sage – he is called the Self. He lives in your body, he is your body.

There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom. And who knows for what purpose your body requires precisely your best wisdom?¹⁴²

This is why "the ostensible issues are always secondary," as Harris says, why the populist conservative isn't particularly interested in crafting finely-honed arguments. Liberals may disdain conservative claims of cultural oppression for the "little intelligence" which they appear to display. But I am arguing that this "little intelligence" is merely the "the little instrument and toy" of a "great intelligence." And that great intelligence is conservatives' under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative. That

¹⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), pg. 61-62.

understanding is under-theorized because it is ultimately a *physiological* intelligence, the physiological memory of the civilizing process, of the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. This may be poorly articulated by mere “sense and spirit, but the threat is viscerally discerned by the Self that lies behind these. This is why conservatives’ amygdalas do what they do.

If our modern consciousness cannot recognize itself as but an instrument operating in the service of a vaster intelligence, this is owing to our Christian and enlightenment heritage, which the New Enlightenment is now seeking to overcome. John Gray writes that humanism is “a secular religion thrown together from decaying scraps of Christian myth,”¹⁴³ one of which is free will, whose origins lie in the Christian faith against which humanists rail.¹⁴⁴ Liberals ostensibly secular and hard-nosed dismissals of conservative grievances partakes of just this contradiction. For their sense that conservatives could just discard their claims of cultural oppression if they simply woke up one day and decided to become mature adults is one of those decaying scraps of Christian myth, free will, to which liberals cling as tenacious as some conservatives cling to their Bibles. For what is the buffered self and its ethos other than a secularization of the Christian soul, which is now to be saved by liberalism and its struggle against all which would tempt us away from it?

Hence liberals’ inability to recognize that conservative claims of cultural oppression might express something fundamental to human nature. Frank writes that the conservative backlash provides its adherents with a “ready-made identity” they find “so compelling that they have internalized it, made it their own, shaped themselves according to its attractive and uniquely American understanding of authenticity and victimhood.”¹⁴⁵ But this identity, I am here arguing, could not have been thus internalized absent a neurological substratum that facilitates this. Human beings may have been blank slates under the Old Enlightenment, but they are not that under the new one. If this ready-made identity is so compelling, this is because it lends confused expression to something *real*, even if that reality is recalcitrant to the conventions of liberal articulacy. This is what the New Enlightenment *should* teach liberals—not that conservatives are more closed-minded, but that politics is ultimately about something deeper than the conscious mind.

¹⁴³ John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007), pg. 31.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. xi.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 158.

4. A Preferred Basket of Liberal Values

Macedo lists as liberal virtues “a reflective, self-critical attitude, tolerance, openness to change, self-control, a willingness to engage in dialogue with others, and a willingness to revise and shape projects in order to respect the rights of others or in response to fresh insight into one’s own character and ideals.”¹⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Rawls defines liberal virtue as “reasonableness and a sense of fairness, a spirit of compromise and a readiness to meet others halfway.”¹⁴⁷ These virtues seem unobjectionable in the abstract and when taken at face value, which is how Macedo and Rawls present them. But they also have a dark underside that arises from the very nature of the buffered identity. Taylor’s criticizes of a certain kind of “normalizing” humanism that

hides from itself how great the conflict is between the different things we value. It artificially removes the tragedy, the wrenching choices between incompatibles, the dilemmas, which are inseparable from human life. It creates the impression that all good things come together effortlessly, but it only achieves this by denaturing and downgrading some of the goods which stand in the way of the preferred basket of liberal values...By discrediting the refractory drives as pathological or under-developed, civilizing humanism implies that the proper human fulfillment will be, for the “normal,” conflict-free. An untroubled happiness attends this normalcy, because nothing important need be sacrificed for it.¹⁴⁸

Such a humanism must engender reductive understandings of human nature that

fail altogether to recognize wide ranges of human motivation: the search for meaning, for self-affirmation, the demands of dignity and the wounds of humiliation, not to speak of the wilder ranges of sexual desire and the love of battle. They see them as either containable peccadilloes, or in their more threatening forms as pathology. Thus they fail altogether to measure the real costs of suppressing them or stamping them out. They take the (in Foucault’s sense) normalized for fulfilled human beings.¹⁴⁹

Liberalism’s “stealth and subterfuge” ultimately consists in this normalization. What we observed to be liberals’ circumscribed, selective naturalism is but the corollary of liberals’ commitment to naturalizing the buffered identity as essential human nature. For that selective naturalism serves to obscure what are the human costs of superimposing that identity over our default porousness and the impulses it spawns—patriotism, manliness, openness to the sacred and to anti-structure. These become seen, not as genuine values, but as mere “glitches” in the untroubled normalcy that should ordinarily accompany the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. What Lasch condemns as upper middle-class liberals’ “hygienic conception of life” is the imperative to sanitize and “scrub out,” either empirically or conceptually, all evidence of resistance to the civilizing process, all evidence of the latter’s costs and social

¹⁴⁶ Qt. in Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton University Press 2005), pg. 161.

¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 635.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pg. 641-42.

artificiality. To this end, liberalism must disguise the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity as a brute, unvarnished liberation, must disguise molding and coercion as just the subtraction of confining epistemic horizons. Since the truth only sets us free, liberalism cannot give rise to any real conflicts.

But conservatives see past this disguise. Michael Savage is refusing a “preferred basket of liberal values” when he dismisses “anger management” as yet another of liberalism’s many insidious tentacles:

So, what can I do? That’s the way I am. My vocal cords are what they are. And the fact of the matter is, so is my testosterone level, and so is my anger and rage level. And, no, I don’t plan to go to anger management classes in the very near future. I’ll let God take care of that at the end of the road. Anger management comes when they put me in the ground. That’s when the anger management starts. In the next world, I don’t want to manage in this world.

You manage your anger, Mr. Liberal, because that’s another one of your liberal tricks. You find the man who gets furious and really wants to change things. You tell him he’s psychotic and needs anger management. You know what I say? “Drop dead.” That’s what I say, I’ve said it since the first day. Don’t try to manage me or my anger. It’s not your business.¹⁵⁰

In asserting that anger management begins “in the next world,” Savage is announcing his refusal of the spiritual-secular compression atop of which liberalism developed, his refusal of the civilizing process, and, correlatively, his resignation to the merely animal in man. Anger management can qualify as a “liberal trick” in the context of the mutation counter-narrative because the *concrete social meaning* of liberal ideals is not only to uphold certain kinds of conduct and judgment but also to uphold a secularized asceticism and accordingly suppress those elements of the personality that are recalcitrant to it. Anger management is not just a clearing away of confining horizons, but the inculcation of a particular identity by a particular culture. And this is what gives Savage’s anger its *political* significance, as one more expression of conservatives’ under-theorized understanding of mutation counter-narrative. Perhaps that anger cannot be translated into any cogent thoughts today. But its retention at least preserves the future possibility thereof, holding a candle to the buffered distance and highlighting its peculiarly courtly rationality as a contingent social construction rather than the ineluctable order of things. If liberals are inured to this layer of meaning, this is because their very identities require them to dismiss the anger as pathological, or “containable peccadillo” at best, a bare irascibility bereft cognitive content.

But this dismissiveness is in fact a liberal privilege. Stanley Fish remarks that religious traditionalists must seek, not to reach an accommodation with liberalism, but to “rout it from the field.” By contrast, liberals need not be so aggressive. For “the field, as it is presently demarcated, is already theirs.” And so liberals need only be “passive-aggressive.”¹⁵¹ This is the source of liberals’ perennial

¹⁵⁰ Michael Savage, *The Enemy Within: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on our Schools, Faith, and Military* (Thomas Nelson 2003), pg. 7.

¹⁵¹ Stanley Fish, *The Trouble With Principle* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), pg. 250.

rhetorical advantage over conservatives. Presenting itself as a rejection of anthropocentric hero-systems, the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity seems to exude a certain passivity, the self-restraint to not impose any purely subjective meanings upon our common social world. But given that this ethos is a hero-system in its own right, the passivity is concomitantly an act of aggression, part and parcel of an attempt to elevate and impose one particular human make-up. This is what makes liberalism a sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized hero-system, a hero-system that disguises its status as a hero-system. Liberals own the field as presently demarcated because the preeminence of the epistemological framework reduces human difference to intellectual difference of opinion. But this field is a “liberal trick,” because it preempts conservatives from articulating their underlying grievance. This is liberalism’s normalizing agenda, in whose service the epistemological framework operates. Lacking a language through which to expose this trick, conservatives are driven further and further into irresolvable frustration and from there descend into an aggressiveness that seems to vindicate liberal preconceptions. Liberals can therefore assault conservatives through their very passivity, their very temperateness, because this is functioning as a silent judgment in the service of the buffered identity.

This silent judgment can be discerned in Sommers’ characterization of feminist Carol Gilligan’s pedagogical agenda. Gilligan, explains Sommers, hopes to develop a method to counter the patriarchal social forces that have coercively masculinized boys and thereby prevented them from achieving genuine happiness. She wishes to “free boys’ voices, to create conditions that allow boys to say what they know,” ideally “mak[ing] their aggressiveness and need for dominance things of the past.”¹⁵² But Sommers believes that what presents itself as an emancipatory ideal essentially pathologizes millions of healthy boys. Refusing to distinguish between healthy and aberrant masculinity, these feminists “look at these insulting, hitting, chasing, competitive creatures and see them as proto-criminals.”¹⁵³ Hence their opposition to games of tag, which they condemn for encouraging aggressiveness in place of cooperation.¹⁵⁴ With the “energy, competitiveness, and corporal daring of normal, decent males” now suspect as the seeds of violence and sexual assault,¹⁵⁵ the end result is that “[m]ore and more schoolboys inhabit a milieu of disapproval.” “Routinely regarded as protosexists, potential harassers, and

¹⁵² Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000), pg. 127.

¹⁵³ Ibid., pg. 63.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 52.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 14.

perpetuators of gender inequity,” they “live under a cloud of censure, in a permanent state of culpability.”¹⁵⁶

These opposed interpretations of Gilligan’s project derive from the opposition between the subtraction account and the mutation counter-narrative, which here as elsewhere reveals the covert imperiousness of the liberal agenda. Gilligan frames her project through the lens of the subtraction account and the epistemological framework, as a project of “enlightenment,” the elimination of the confining epistemic horizons that suppress essential human nature. She wishes to “free” boys’ voices in order that they may “say what they know.” But conservatives must interpret this project through the mutation counter-narrative, at the level of cosmological orientation. And here they smell only “cheap neural perfume” that disguises a primordial hostility to the anarchic will of free men, to manliness, to anti-structure. Liberals who promote such projects are simply carrying forth the agenda that have always defined modern elites, which is to impose one or another form of “civility” upon the unwashed masses. Liberalism is merely this agenda’s latest ideological superstructure. Akeel Bilgrami writes that the ideal of civility served as a screen behind which the early modern courts concealed the cruelties they perpetuated, so that they could see “only the cruelties in the behavior and lifestyles of a brute populace lacking such civilities.” With the courtly ethos having been later codified into the Enlightenment, its heirs could overlook that their “humanistic rationality” had incorporated courtly cruelty and blindness, and so present their ideals in “*innocently thin* terms.”¹⁵⁷ This is precisely what Gilligan is doing in her talk of freeing boys to say what they know. For a thicker interpretation of her project reveals a more robust agenda, which is to shape and mold boys in accordance with the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity.

Gilligan presents her agenda as driven by empathetic enlightenment. But this is merely the veneer behind which a sublimated, intellectualized, and etherialized hero-system operates. Enlightenment is the *epistemological misinterpretation* of what is in fact an attack on those parts of human nature that do not sit easily with a preferred basket of liberal values, which in one way or another impede the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. Empathy and enlightenment are merely the foreground behind which liberalism’s “hidden curriculum” is implemented, ideological instruments through which to transform people into good, universalistic liberals so disciplined as to have uprooted every last trace of aggression and insensitivity, replacing this with awareness and altruism. But who, asks Max Scheler, can

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 57.

¹⁵⁷ Akeel Bilgrami, “What is Enchantment?,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), pg. 151.

“fail to detect the secretly glimmering *hatred* against the positive higher values, which are *not* essentially tied to the “species” – a hatred hidden deep down below this ‘mild,’ ‘understanding,’ ‘humane’ attitude?”¹⁵⁸ This mild and humane understanding harbors a secret hatred because its unacknowledged target is all the human impulses that have been excommunicated by the disciplinary society. And the overconfidence of self-absorbed rambunctious boys living in the moment served Gilligan as a symbol of those impulses, and her commitment to reforming them is her contribution to this project of excommunication—the basic *illiberalism* always presupposed by any preferred basket of liberal values.

This illiberalism can also be observed in Sommers’ description of an incident at Vassar College where the assistant dean of students ventured that several male students who had been exonerated of false accusations of rape were not the worse off for the ordeal, which offered them an opportunity for a self-exploration they would not otherwise have had.¹⁵⁹ If the false accusations were redeemed by the self-exploration they facilitated, this is because feminism here stands in opposition, not only to rape itself, but to everything in human nature which could conceivably precipitate rape, everything that resists the ordering impulses of the buffered identity. For this is what the students would have been exploring in an effort to expose and extirpate any last impulse toward primeval, ape-like self-affirmation in their being. Like many examples of politically correct excesses, the dean’s statements may not be representative of what most liberals believe. But they are indicative of the cosmological orientation that underpins what they believe. Representing the thoroughgoing compression of the spiritual and the secular, liberalism must seek to extirpate the “peculiarly human emotions,” which is to say everything that could impede the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity.

This is potentially more repressive than the traditional morality that liberalism seeks to supplant. Conservatives insist that the anarchic will of free men be properly acknowledged, if only through the traditional values that would restrain it (e.g., the Code of the Gentleman). If liberals believe we can live without this kind of moral restraint, this is only because they believe we can extirpate what is being restrained. This is what the self-exploration urged by the dean was intended to facilitate. The Code of the Gentleman comes *too late* for her, because it presupposes the retention of that which resists it, presupposes the resignation to the sin and disorder in opposition to which the modern dispensation defines itself. As a modern elite, the dean was seeking to introduce the unwashed masses to the Augustinian self-examination and self-dissection that was once restricted to the monastery. Refusing to

¹⁵⁸ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, pgs. 85-86.

¹⁵⁹ Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pg. 44.

compress the secular and the spiritual into each other, conservatives are more likely to believe in original sin as a *doctrine*. But it is liberals who, having undertaken that compression, are more likely to translate that doctrine into an actual practice, and this in the end means turning moral purity into an intrinsic virtue to be maximized at all costs as a counterweight to our basic condition. Far from having repudiated that doctrine, liberals have merely compressed and secularized it as their opposition to a barbarian past of which conservative impulses are the contemporary residue.

Conservatives understand this intuitively. If they make much ado about what seem like unrepresentative or inconsequential incidents of politically correct excess—like the Vassar dean’s remarks or occasional feminist opposition to games of tag—this is because these occasions permit them to expose that liberalism does indeed present itself in “innocently thin terms,” and that a thicker description would reveal the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. The peculiarly courtly rationality, let us recall, sought to banish, not only violence, but also all *reminders* of violence, like the brandishing of knives, or any indication that a meat-dish might have something to do with the killing of animals. And what conservatives condemn as political correctness is the contemporary, politicized legacy of that imperative. The corporal daring and aggressiveness that worry some feminists are not in and of themselves sociopathic. But they can in some contexts and at the unconscious or semi-conscious level of Bourdieu’s bodily *hexis* represent an implicit *ideological* challenge to the ordering impulses of the buffered identity, broadcasting in vague and indefinite terms what is a refusal of its disciplines and repressions, a refusal of the excarnated subjectivity and expressive moderation that shield us from the violence and disorder of a barbarian past. This is what provokes the apprehensions of feminists, who like liberals in general seek, not only to solve problems, but to eliminate the *roots* of the problem. Political correctness is a way of responding to those roots, which liberals are discerning intuitively in what they see as the “micro-aggressions” of conservatives. But being uninterested in those roots, conservatives must see political correctness as oversensitivity before mere trifles. Their disagreement with liberals reflects, not the disingenuousness of one of the parties, but their differential positioning along the civilizing process.

Originating as it does in what Elias calls the “inward retraining of the instinctual impulses denied direct access to the motor apparatus,” the liberal identity is tied symbolically and physiologically to ways of “functioning bodily in the social and physical world” that seem to validate the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity. And those who have not securely internalized these ways of functioning may provoke liberal concern regardless of they have actually done or said, because the basic disposition to transgress against the disciplines of liberalism is all the same there. As we saw in Chapter 4, Lakoff believes that while contemporary conservatives may not embrace the historically classic “bigoted

clauses”—racism, anti-Semitism, etc.—this merely leaves more open “slots” within which new bigoted clauses may be inserted as circumstances permit. Politically correct liberals intuit the existence of these open slots, the often subtle queues indicating resistance the buffered identity. And this cannot but elicit “vague premonitions of erosion and unraveling” even when the queues lack clear political content, because the politics can always be slipped into the open slots later. Liberals must therefore close these slots preemptively, which is the purpose of political correctness. As we saw with Goldberg in Chapter 3, the liberal narrative identifies as racism or fascism any ideal or impulse that strikes liberals as “callousness of the right-wing sort.” And this callousness is at its root the conservative’s visceral resistance to the kind of self-reflexivity that liberals seek to inculcate, to the extended chains of social interdependency and social identification presupposed by the buffered distance. This identity is the *sine qua non* of liberal prescriptions, which is why uprooting resistance to it must always be the first order of business.

This preemptive impulse is why Lasch can observe that Theodore Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality* “revealed more about the enlightened prejudices of the professional classes than about the authoritarian prejudices among the common people.”¹⁶⁰ Interviewing his subjects, the author decided that agreement with the proposition that “science has its place, but there are many important things that can never possibly be understood by the human mind” was evidence of “authoritarian submission.” And the beliefs that “an insult to our honor must always be punished” and that “if people would talk less and work more, everybody would be better off” Adorno considered signs of “authoritarian aggression.”¹⁶¹ If views that are not facially authoritarian were nevertheless so classified, this is because reservations about the value of science and rational deliberation are, just like any residual attachments to old-fashioned notions like honor, the seeds of the unraveling of the buffered identity, the beginnings of a slippery slope that must be preempted even in its benign phases. Liberals’ facially unobjectionable demands for tolerance, sensitivity, “open-mindedness” are directed, not merely at the prospect of concrete harms and injustices, but at any intimations of resistance to the ordering impulses of the buffered identity—what the survey respondents unwittingly betrayed.

Hence Kimball’s complaint that the “feminization of society” is a “coefficient of the triumph of liberalism,” whose “distrust of masculine directness is the other side of its inveterate impulse to moralize all social activity.”¹⁶² As we saw in the last chapter, “masculine directness” is a direct challenge to the

¹⁶⁰ 453

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² T. Roger Kimball, *Mill, Stephen, and the Nature of Freedom*, in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), pg. 59.

properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity, the introduction of anti-structure against this identity's ordering impulses. And liberalism's "inveterate impulse to moralized all social activity" is liberals' continuing awareness that the seeds of such a challenge may be quietly growing anywhere. Pre-modern porousness being human nature's default setting, it is like a cancer that may be in remission but can spread again anytime with any loosening of the inhibitions that make liberalism possible. Liberals sense this danger intuitively and experience "vague premonitions or erosion or unraveling" in response, which in turn spurs on liberalism's inquisitorial tendencies, the imperative to expose and reform whatever human impulses might prove recalcitrant to liberalism's universalistic consciousness. This is why liberal morality can never be as secular, hard-nosed, and "experiential" as liberals would like to imagine. For liberals must, beyond protecting concrete individuals against concrete harms, also protect their *morality itself* as a kind of "order of things" that must be symbolically honored in the general comportment and opinions of individuals, who must be periodically tested for any signs of incipient corruption. Hence the phenomenon of diversity or sensitivity training, modern confessionals the purpose of which is to probe and prod people in a way that elicits these signs. Hence too conservatives' conviction that liberals are at least as "moralistic" as they, a conviction that the mutation counter-narrative renders fully intelligible.

Feminist hostility to tag and the like notwithstanding, it would be overstating things to say that contemporary conservatives are, like their pre-modern ancestors, being literally "badgered, bullied, pushed, preached at, drilled" to abandon their "lax and disorganized folkways" and become liberals. But they are being subjected to a sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized recapitulation of that original enterprise, which is what the New Enlightenment allows us to understand. Westen writes:

[T]his process of activation of alternative possibilities outside of awareness, which is basic to human cognition, creates tremendous opportunities for stealth attacks in politics, in which a campaign uses the "cover" of a dominant interpretation of the data to provide plausible deniability for another network intentionally activated under the cover of neural darkness. This is why the Willie Horton ad was so insidious [using the murderous recidivism of a furloughed black convict to criticize Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis's Massachusetts furlough policy]. The network most active by virtue of the verbal content of the ad, and the one of which most viewers were consciously aware, was the "soft on crime" network. But a second, more emotionally powerful network—about scary black men—was also activated.¹⁶³

Here is what Max Scheler calls "organic mendacity," falsification produced underneath the level of conscious thought.¹⁶⁴ And my argument is that liberals are engaged in an exponentially subtler and more sophisticated analogue of these machinations notwithstanding their rationalistic self-conception. The

¹⁶³ Westen, *Political Brain*, pg. 93.

¹⁶⁴ Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. Lewis B. Coser and William W. Holdheim (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010), pg. 49.

verbal content of liberal argument is ostensibly directed toward “issues” and “problems.” But these are, “under the cover of neural darkness,” being deployed to reinforce certain forms of agency and delegitimize others. The project need not be announced because it proceeds through Bourdieu’s “imperceptible cues of bodily *hexis*,” an embodied political mythology that permits social meanings and values to “pass from practice to practice without going through discourse or consciousness.” The purpose of political correctness is to inculcate this mythology, to use concrete issues in a way that promotes a broader ideal of fully realized human nature, the ever-present subtext and undertone of liberal admonitions. If liberals feel that conservatives have histrionically exaggerated the dangers of political correctness, this is only because they are oblivious to what transpires at this level, under the cover of neural darkness. Such is the true target of conservative claims of cultural oppression and the reason why liberals have more real enemies than they care to recognize.

Remarking on Columbia University’s plan to “initiate an awareness of difference and the implications of difference for the Columbia community,” Charles Kors observes that “Columbia administrators simply did not believe that their students could work things out spontaneously,” with one dean having declared “You can’t bring all these people together and say, ‘Now be one big happy community,’ without some sort of training.”¹⁶⁵ The training may be a means of achieving diversity, but the diversity is also an excuse for effecting the training, which is just as important to the liberal agenda. Students could not be entrusted to “work things out spontaneously” because the tolerance being promoted at Columbia was not some generic, free-floating virtue that different people might realize in different ways, for different reasons and on the basis of different assumptions, but rather the concrete affirmation of the particular ethos we have been examining. If conservatives are suspicious of liberal tolerance, this is because this tolerance has just like other liberal ideals been inflected by the ordering impulses of the buffered identity, which are what inspired the Columbia dean’s assessment. His diversity trainers may exude “mildness” and “understanding.” But underneath these intimations lurks a secret hatred for the anarchic will of free men, which the mildness and understanding gently chip away at on the level of bodily *hexis*. Liberals cannot understand conservatives because the buffered identity and its “Old Enlightenment” conception of reason simply inures them to the merely semi-conscious, untheorized layer of human experience to which conservative claims of cultural oppression speak. Identifying as they do with the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, liberals cannot experience them as any kind of imposition, as anything that could produce real enemies. But real enemies they have. And this is why

¹⁶⁵ Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America’s Campuses* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), pg. 218.

conservatives can perceive the exercise of authoritarian micro-power—what Bork describes as the Left’s “mini-tyrannies”—where liberals see only training for enlightenment.

Liberals see only enlightenment because the subtraction account upon which their identities are premised conceals the *continuities* between enlightenment and the traditional religion that enlightenment has supposedly superseded. Nietzsche writes:

We misunderstand the beast of prey and the man of prey...thoroughly, we misunderstand “nature,” as long as we still look for something “pathological” at the bottom of these healthiest of all tropical monsters and growths, or even for some “hell” that is supposed to be innate in them; yet that is what almost all moralists have so far done. Could it be that moralists harbor a hatred of the primeval forest and the tropics? And that the “tropical man” must be discredited at any price, whether as sickness or degeneration of man or as his own hell and self-torture? In favor of the “temperate zone”? In favor of “temperate men”? Of those who are “moral”?¹⁶⁶

The mutation counter-narrative reveals that, as a historical outgrowth of Christianity, liberalism developed through the social *devaluation* of a certain range of ideals, a devaluation of “the primeval forest and the tropics” in favor of the “temperate zone” and “temperate men.” The difference between our modern, secularized society and its Christian precursor is that the moralist’s “hatred of the primeval forest and the tropics” must become disguised and surreptitious. Given that generalized invective against, say, “sinful pride” no longer enjoys any cultural credibility, the impulses that animated that invective must be compressed into ostensibly secular concerns. What was once condemned as sinful pride may now be lamented as the coerced masculinization of those who must now be helped to recover their true selves, to recover the “temperate zone” of an enlightened androgyny. Likewise, expressive moderation advances the “temperate zone” as a corrective to counterproductive ideological discord. But as we saw, this solution presupposes of broader transformation in human beings, a training away from pre-modern porousness toward a more abstract, intellectualized, and “excarnated” conception of themselves. For this is what makes the temperate zone possible.

Liberalism’s inveterate impulse to moralize all social activity never presents itself as raw, unabashed moralism, but always as a specific response to specific social problems which few would deny are problems of some kind or another. But it is only to be expected that the elites’ reforming impulses will express themselves in a more scientifically sophisticated fashion in the context of a more scientifically sophisticated society, where the badgering, bullying, and drilling can be expected to assume a more circuitous and genteel form, advanced as a focused corrective rather than in the name of discipline as such. But behind the focused corrective lies liberalism’s “silent” or “hidden” curriculum, which seeks to

¹⁶⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), Sec. 197.

“mold *people* in a manner that helps ensure that liberal freedom is what they want.”¹⁶⁷ This hidden curriculum targets not only acts but *attitudes*, whatever impulses stand in the way of what Rawls celebrates as a “spirit” of compromise and a “readiness” to meet others halfway. It seeks, not only to solve specific challenges, but to moreover employ these challenges as platforms or object lessons through which to reveal and address their “root cause.” And the root cause of the problem will always inhere in the make-ups of the human beings who are understood to be perpetuating it. The disingenuousness that conservatives discern in liberalism is liberalism’s refusal to straightforwardly acknowledge this agenda and come to terms with its profound moral, social, and political implications.

5. The Coulter Threshold

Brooks writes that in becoming Bobos, former Bohemians have “learn[ed] not to be too zealous about their own visions, lest they offend their neighbors, and themselves.” The “raging bonfire of emancipation” announced by the revolutionaries of the 60s has turned into “the cupped candle of tolerance and moderation.” And so the Bobos are “suspicious of vehemence and fearful of people who communicate their views furiously or without compromise,” suspicious “of people who radiate certitude,” which is an affront to their own “epistemological modesty.”¹⁶⁸ On the subtraction account, this epistemological modesty is simply the supersession of the hero-systems that could induce epistemological immodesty, the supplanting of that immodesty by the liberal virtues. But on the mutation counter-narrative, this modesty and the “expressive moderation” that permits it is the *expression* of a hero-system. It is a contemporary reconstitution of Religious Reform’s hostility to “fanaticism” and “enthusiasm” and of the “austere ethics of belief formation” that developed out of that hostility. For what is suspicion “of people who radiate certitude” but a contemporary, secularized expression of the buffered identity’s hostility toward the embodied feelings of the higher and the threat these pose to ordinary civil authority? The Bobos are tolerant and “open-minded,” not in opposition to hero-systems, but in furtherance of one, for that open-mindedness is an expedient through which our default porousness may be subordinated to the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. What the subtraction account conceals but the mutation counter-narrative reveals is that the liberal virtues are *derivative* upon something more primordial, the secularized asceticism of the buffered identity.

¹⁶⁷ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, pg. 15.

¹⁶⁸ David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: the New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pg. 247.

This is why conservatives do not accept these virtues at face value and rather detect a parochial ethos that the liberal dispensation cannot acknowledge. Lasch writes:

Blind to their own prejudices, the children of light could not see that their own world was in many ways just as narrowly circumscribed as the worker's. If the worker spent his days in the company of "people very like himself," so did the educated classes. Their travels took them around the globe, but the internationalization of the professional and managerial mode of life meant that they encountered the same kind of people and the same living conditions everywhere they went: the same hotels, the same three-star restaurants, the same conference rooms and lecture halls. Education gave them vicarious access to the world's culture, but their acquaintance with that culture was increasingly selective and fragmentary, and it did not seem to have strengthened their capacity for imaginative identification with experience alien to their own. Their educated jargon had lost touch with everyday spoken language and no longer served as a repository of the community's common sense. Academic discourse had achieved a certain analytic precision, in law and medicine and the hard sciences, at the expense of vividness and evocative power; while in fields like psychiatry, sociology, and social work, it merely distinguished insiders from outsiders and gave an air of scientific prestige to practices embarrassed by their homely origins. Academic English—the abstract, uninflected, colorless medium not only of the classroom but of the boardroom, the clinic, the court of law, and the governmental bureau—had discarded most of the earthy idioms that betrayed its provincial Anglo-Saxon past, and the spoken form of this English no longer betrayed any hint of regional accent or dialect. The bureaucratization of language indicates what was happening to intellectual culture as a whole: its transformation into a universal medium in a curious way seemed to weaken its capacity to promote public communication. The people who stood at the forefront of the "communications age" had lost the ability to communicate with anyone but themselves. Their technical jargons were unintelligible to outsiders but immediately recognizable, as the badge of professional status, to fellow specialists all over the world. The cosmopolitanism of educated specialists overcame the old barriers of local, regional, and even national identity but insulated them from ordinary people and ordinary human experience.¹⁶⁹

If the "children of light" seem prepared to sacrifice content to style, this is because this style serves to uphold a particular identity. They will defend their bureaucratized language eviscerated of vividness and evocative power in "innocently thin terms," as intellectual rigor pure and simple, the mark of cosmopolitan sophistication. But this sophistication performs a social signaling function the upshot of which is to communicate acceptance of the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, to signal one that one has overcome "the promptings of the senses" and can resist the "consolations of the enchanted world" (like the earthy idioms of a provincial Anglo-Saxon past). What Lasch characterizes as the elites' deracination is just the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity as seen from the perspective of its costs, which the liberal dispensation cannot recognize as costs. What the elites take for intellectual rigor pure and simple is in fact intellectual rigor as inflected by the liberal culture's disciplinary impulses, its peculiarly courtly rationality, which can subordinate intellectual virtue to social virtue. In

¹⁶⁹ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), pg. 466-67.

concrete practice, the reflective, self-critical attitude celebrated by Macedo and Rawls refers, not to any general capacity to evolve in response to new experiences, but to the willingness to constrain one's thoughts and feelings in deference to "educated jargon," in deference to the particular nuances, shades of meaning, and conceptual divisions that the children of light have designated as "serious"—and therefore affirm their particular ethos as singularly enlightened and rational. Only then is one accredited as possessed of a "reflective, self-critical attitude," as given to "self-control," or as willing to "engage in dialogue with others," as Macedo says. In short, liberals cannot recognize that the liberal virtues are not free-standing, and are rather bound up with a thicker identity that must be upheld socially through all the unstated and understated mores of the liberal culture. The children of light may see themselves as liberated souls who have cast off the confining illusions and horizons of the past. But underneath this self-image lies a distinct culture, an indigenous "traditionalism" that is as intransigent as any.

This traditionalism is why conservative claimants of cultural oppression can think themselves the outsiders to an all-pervasive liberal culture. As we saw in Chapter 2, Codevilla charges that elite universities admit candidates who contribute to a "social profile that fits the school's image of itself," who demonstrate a commitment to "fit in," to be "in with the right people," and give "the required signs that one is on the right side, and joining in despising the Outs." The despised Outs include, not only avowed racists, sexists, and homophobes, but, as we began to see in the last section, whoever might be seen as exuding the seeds of a challenge to the buffered identity and its civilizational framework, anyone who, having failed to properly internalize the peculiarly courtly rationality, might be less ostentatiously self-possessed and less "flexible" than is demanded by the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity, "radiating" a certain conviction or vision that seems less than properly "civilized." And yet liberals cannot acknowledge that they indeed have "despised Outs," that they are motivated, not only by high ideals, but by a visceral revulsion before the residual porousness of the ordinary American, before those who resist what Lasch calls the "cosmopolitanism of educated specialists," which now defines civility for us. This revulsion is the pre-rational prehistory of liberalism, an expression of the affective-instinctual transformation that has permitted its high ideals to flourish.

The significance of Freud, writes Richard Rorty, is that he "he breaks down all the traditional distinctions between the higher and the lower, the essential and the accidental, the central and the peripheral," thereby leaving us with a self "which is a tissue of contingencies rather than an at least potentially well-ordered system of faculties." It is this basic arbitrariness that explains "why we deplore cruelty in some cases and relish it in others," why "our ability to love is restricted to some very particular

shapes and sizes and colors of people, things, or ideas.”¹⁷⁰ The hypocrisy which conservatives perennially discern in liberalism originates in liberals’ attempt to present what is a tissue of contingencies as a potentially well-ordered system of faculties. In concealing from themselves how liberalism is built atop the tissue of contingencies chronicled by the mutation counter-narrative, liberals also conceal from themselves how their ability to love is restricted as it in fact is, how their identity-affirmation requirements compel them to despise a certain range of personalities and temperaments. Liberals may be free of some traditional social prejudices to which many a conservative remains beholden. But that very freedom is the outgrowth of an “original spiritual vision.” It is facilitated, not by individual virtue, but by *other* social prejudices that become recognizable as such only in the context of the mutation counter-narrative. Liberals may not engage in any flagrantly irrational discrimination against broad, easily identifiable swaths of the population. But their commitment to equality is nevertheless circumscribed by their hero-system, which will entail forms of subtler, generally deniable discrimination against individuals who in their attitudes and demeanors fail to endorse the “temperate zones.”

But conservatives cannot live in these zones. They feel oppressed by “liberalism” because liberalism, as Mansfield puts it, “in the end lives in the given,” because “[f]or all its devotion to progress, it does not inspire greatness,” and “arrives at the equality of men and women by downsizing greatness to ‘individuality,’” blind to what has been lost.¹⁷¹ For all their *prima facie* appeal, Macedo’s liberal virtues are, in the end, prescriptions for compromising with the given. They permit individual freedom, but at the price of excommunicating human impulses that resist the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity, that challenge the authenticity of what the liberal elites hold out as their cosmopolitanism—the “given” of liberalism. The buffered distance arose historically as a *refusal* of the given, a refusal of “the easy comforts of conformity to authority, of the consolations of an enchanted world, of the surrender to the promptings of the senses.” And it is this legacy that sustains liberalism’s self-image as the guardian of individuality against the collectivizing social illusions of a benighted past. If liberalism lives in the given “in the end,” this is because the sense of special dignity that surrounds this stance has *assumed a life of its own*, becoming the new given, endowed with a social prestige that lives on independently of the struggles through which it first originated historically. Lasch’s passage above is describing the operations of this prestige, the social meanings that disguise what is a surrender to the given in an aura of courageous, emancipated individualism. Having become democratized as a ubiquitous cultural currency, what may

¹⁷⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, pg. 32.

¹⁷¹ Harvey C. Mansfield, *Manliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pg. 188.

once have been a genuine refusal of the easy comforts of conformity to authority has become the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry thereof.

As we have seen, the histrionic mimicry is intrinsic to the liberal project, whose basic contradiction must be in one way or concealed or rationalized. Dalrymple writes that Mill's attempt to synthesize "the romantic cult of the individual" with a "puritanical utilitarianism" had to produce an unrealistic view of human beings and the social order.¹⁷² If that attempted synthesis—of which the Bobos are now the embodiment—must fail, this is because "rational control," as Mansfield says, "tries to free itself from an individual self, which it sees as arbitrary, distracting, entangling, and irrational."¹⁷³ The buffered identity grants control over, and expression to, the self. But it does so only by first simplifying the self, and then naturalizing the end-product in a way that conceals the process that generated it from view, denying human reality to whatever cannot be subsumed within its conventions, to whatever throws a wrench in the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. The Bobos cultivate an ethos "that celebrates, actually demands, endless innovation, self-expansion, and personal growth."¹⁷⁴ But the notion that these things could be summarily willed as a regimen, that all that is required here is some single-minded commitment and dedication already betrays the contradiction at the heart of the Bobo project, and the buffered identity. The latter may promote the individual against the irrational collectivizing social illusions to which conservatives may sometimes be drawn. But it simultaneously suppresses that which is, or even just *seems*, irrational *within* the individual, which is an equal or greater affront to its special dignity. This is why liberalism must downsize greatness to individuality, because the seeds of greatness will always have a logic that resists its disciplines, a logic that is incompatible with the liberal virtues.

"Conservaphobia" is the balm with which liberalism soothes the ensuing dissonance. Allan Bloom quips that "anti-bourgeois animus is the opiate of the last man."¹⁷⁵ And if liberals require the opiate of anti-conservative animus, this is to distract them from how much they *share* with conservatives, from how much their counter-culture is a culture, a set of pieties and mores to which the individual is subservient. This denial is why liberalism requires its own *Other*, a scapegoat onto which liberals' own conservatism may be projected. It is also why conservatives believe that it is they and not liberals who are the true defenders of the individual. The individual freedom which they celebrate is not the expressive autonomy cherished by liberals, but something more concrete and menacing, all the human impulses suppressed

¹⁷² Theodore Dalrymple, *In Praise of Prejudice: The Necessity of Preconceived Ideas* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), pgs. 42-43.

¹⁷³ Mansfield, *Manliness*, pg. 235.

¹⁷⁴ Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, pg. 226

¹⁷⁵ Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), pg. 78.

and discredited by the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity—the “anarchic will of free men” in opposition to which the rational autonomy of liberals has been erected.

It was the pursuit of just this kind of freedom that defined the life of now deceased conservative icon Andrew Breitbart, whose struggles embody the logic I have described. Breitbart was for several years a firebrand of anti-Obama sentiment in Tea Party circles, where he was admired for his pugnacious defiance of liberal hegemony. And his autobiographical *Righteous Indignation* explains that this achievement was long in the making, the outcome of a protracted struggle to achieve the self-confidence and self-awareness required to defy liberalism. Breitbart had emerged from his Los Angeles upbringing as a default, knee-jerk liberal and spent his undergraduate years at Tulane University in fraternity-induced debauchery, proceeding through life in a general stupor. While the debauchery and the 2.2 GPA it entailed seemed unfortunate, Breitbart recognized retrospectively that it was precisely this indifference to academics that shielded him from absorbing the cultural Marxism that had infiltrated academia—the fate of more diligent students. Notwithstanding his liberal socialization, Breitbart had always felt that something was amiss in the anti-Americanism being promoted all around him. But his hedonism had left him fairly apolitical at this stage of his life, and so he experienced only a diffuse, ill-articulated discomfort with the liberalism that surrounded him on every side.

The years following graduation were characterized by the same wandering aimlessness and distraction, with Breitbart waiting tables, working as a courier, and seeing nothing that could invigorate his energies and induce him to assume responsibility for his life. But the stupor gradually dissipated through a steadily growing enthusiasm for conservative politics, as he became more and more awoken to how a minority of liberal elites had commandeered the reigns of a center-right nation. Breitbart had never been fully at ease with liberalism. But it took a series of events—the need to support himself financially, the influence of a conservative father-in-law, and the Clarence Thomas hearings in the Senate—to incrementally erode his socially instilled inhibitions against embracing conservatism. With the benefit of these experiences, Breitbart eventually reached the point where he could listen to Rush Limbaugh and criticize liberals without the guilt and self-doubt with which his former liberalism had constrained him. From there he went on to become a conservative new media activist, developing a well-respected expertise at discovering and disseminating stories that would expose both the unsavory machinations of liberals and the mainstream media’s complicity in covering them up.

Breitbart’s conservative *bildungsroman* reaches its narrative apex in his political coming-of-age appearance on liberal Bill Maher’s television comedy talk show, where he would, outnumbered, defend the anti-Obama movement and Rush Limbaugh against charges of racism. As he had predicted, Breitbart

became the target of the very tactics he had by then made a career of exposing. Maher, he explains, had “predetermined to make mincemeat out of me by using his winks, looks, nods, dismissive gestures, and comedy to make me the outsider.”¹⁷⁶ Beyond this, Maher cut off Breitbart’s response to liberal black professor Michael Eric Dyson’s longwinded and pretentious argument in order to praise Dyson with “that is some motherfucking articulateness,” thereby insinuating that Breitbart lacked this articulateness and eliciting the liberal audience’s wild applause. Such a scenario had represented the sum of all Breitbart’s fears, but it was also the trial by fire through which he finally came into his own:

I felt something different: an almost druglike and ethereal and divine exultation. Recognition that I had been born, publicly and politically, for the first time. It was like looking into a mirror and recognizing, *This is who I am. I’m not going to tap-dance around what I believe in anymore.* Even though I had secretly believed in conservative ideas, and even though I had used different tactics to push them, and even though I had insinuated my ideas into the marketplace and effectively circumvented the Complex by contributing to the New Media, I had never been willing to stick my neck out like Rush Limbaugh or Ann Coulter or Sean Hannity. I had never been willing to stand out there and be the object of public ridicule. I had feared what it would be like, feared what retribution would come, feared what the social consternation would be, feared what the swords and the slings and the arrows and the rocks upon my body would feel like, feared a comedienne whose work I enjoyed mocking me in her presence. I had feared in both my waking and sleeping hours what it would be like.

I had passed what I call the Coulter Threshold: the point where you understand that Ann Coulter and those like her are standing up for what they believe in, feeling the righteousness of living without fear of missing a dinner invite from Tina Brown for fundraisers with Steve Capus or Ben Sherwood or Steven Spielberg or Jeffrey Katzenberg—or, worse, the agony of being excoriated by those conservatives who fret that their liberal overlords will start admonishing them for keeping company with you. Feeling the thrill of sending a message to these people that we reject their worldview the way they reject ours.¹⁷⁷

Breitbart had finally embraced his nature as a conservative claimant of cultural oppression *in toto*. His “almost druglike and ethereal and divine exultation” was his long-deferred reward for his initially ambivalent but increasingly steadfast struggle to resist the blandishments of liberalism. The liberals who might expect to receive prestigious invitations to dine with Steven Spielberg or be praised by Maher as articulate were people who had unlike Breitbart acquiesced in “the given,” artificially simplifying themselves in accordance with a preferred basket of liberal values and emerging into the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity. These were the people who woke up for their college classes and upon graduating began to accumulate the symbolic capital they would need to thrive within the liberal culture. By contrast, Breitbart had resisted this untroubled normalcy and embraced the entanglements of

¹⁷⁶ Andrew Breitbart, *Righteous Indignation: Excuse Me While I Save the World* (New York and Boston: Grand Central Publishing, 2001), pg. 141.

¹⁷⁷ Breitbart, *Righteous Indignation*, pg. 146-47.

individuality, those elements of our human nature that are recalcitrant to the conventions of Bobo self-realization. Having repudiated “the given” of his liberal milieu, he was necessarily condemned to years of wandering in the wilderness like the prophet who has yet to receive his calling, years of inarticulate and inefficient aimlessness and confusion. Rejecting the blandishments of liberalism while still lacking an authentic moral compass to compensate, he had left one shore without a clear view of the other, and could only twist and turn in the wind, with idle curiosity and the bottle as his only refuge. Already here he was culturally oppressed, because it was the dominion of the liberal culture that had condemned him to this fate.

But this oppression was the sacrifice demanded by the higher integration that Breitbart’s turn to conservatism eventually permitted. Conservative claimants of cultural oppression refuse to be, as Gelernter says, “trained and groomed like prize puppies to be good liberals,” and Breitbart had shed the last vestige of this training and grooming in himself when he refused to apologize for his conservatism notwithstanding the usual intimidation. For it was in this moment of authenticity that he finally became reunited with his true self, the self that liberalism had until then withheld from him, creating a beacon of hope for all conservatives who had been similarly cowed and dispossessed. Liberals may dismiss Breitbart’s ecstasies as cheap identity politics. But for the conservative claimant of cultural oppression who has reached the Coulter Threshold, these ecstasies are what Lakoff would call “direct touch with human flourishing at the most basic level of experience.” For that flourishing was Breitbart’s liberation from the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, from the panoply of inhibitions—e.g., expressive moderation and epistemological modesty—that sustain the liberal culture.

Maher and his audience were the symbolic embodiments of this culture. And this was why defying them proved so liberating for Breitbart. His “almost druglike and ethereal and divine exultation” was his release from the secularized asceticism atop of which liberalism is built, his reunification with those parts of the self that liberalism must excommunicate in the name of the social discipline it offers. Maher’s winks, looks, nods, and dismissive gestures were embodiments of this discipline, the bullying, badgering, and scolding of modern elites, and so precisely what Breitbart had to overcome in order to be fully reborn. The Bobo who looks in the mirror may see “endless innovation, self-expansion, and personal growth.” But the conservative claimant of cultural oppression who finally achieves the Coulter Threshold sees *himself*. And this is because he sees that liberalism is predicated on what is “one historically constructed understanding of human agency among others.” Having in Christ-like fashion suffered the stings of swords, slings, arrows, and rocks upon his body—the “full force” of liberals’ “rhetorical firepower” as Hannity would say—Breitbart was resurrected through ecstasies that finally transported

him fully beyond the confines of this understanding, immersing him in a higher truth that is inaccessible to the merely articulate, inaccessible to the “epistemological fragment” of man. Only by transcending the latter could Breitbart disarm liberalism of the power it formerly wielded over him, and this was what his ecstasies achieved.

6. High-Spirited Nonconformists

John McWhorter decries the African-American Teacher’s Association of New York for refusing to condemn the anti-intellectualism of disruptive inner-city black students and instead idealizing them as “high-spirited nonconformists” resisting the repression of white middle-class values.¹⁷⁸ Not every liberal will go so far as to exalt academic misbehavior as some kind of political statement. But most liberals will insist that whatever criticisms one issues here be sensitive to the historical inequalities that form the broader context of these students’ alienation, which cannot be reduced to bare delinquency and malice. Facing no realistic alternative to inner city life and the racism that created it, these youths do what they must to retain their self-respect under the conditions at hand, even if this means behavior that seems counterproductive. Conservatives may attribute inner city problems to cultural dysfunction. But this dysfunction is itself a product of historical inequalities that live on in the present, which is exactly what moralistic attacks on the pathologies of the “black culture” obscure.

But conservatives can make a similar kind of argument in defense of the conservative culture. For the mutation counter-narrative is the record of the *historical inequalities between liberals and conservatives*. And if liberals insist that the personal and social malformations of some minority groups be understood in their total context, rather than artificially uprooted from it as self-explanatory problems, then intellectual consistency requires that the “root causes” of conservative claims of cultural oppression be similarly acknowledged. If understanding the travails of African-Americans requires that we look beyond present crime statistics toward the beginnings of African slavery in America, then we can also step back just a bit further in time to examine the rise of the modern from out of the pre-modern and the new hierarchies it spawned. From this perspective, we can see that conservative claimants of cultural oppression are no mere delinquents, but rather “high-spirited nonconformists” in revolt against the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. Whatever their irrationalities, these originate in this resistance, in what is a *political* struggle against the liberal culture. This is something that *liberals* refuse to recognize and is the reason why the mutation counter-narrative allows the Right to become the Left

¹⁷⁸ John McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (HarperPerennia, 2001), pg. 69

and accuse the Left of becoming the Right. For the mutation counter-narrative allows us to *politicize* what liberals prefer to dismiss as raw irrationality. Liberals will classify as pure pathology whatever does not conform to their preferred basket of liberal values. But these pathologies can also be understood as just the byproducts of liberal domination, of the ascendancy of a historically constructed understanding of human agency with which liberals are privileged to identify. For it is this that creates the inequalities to which conservative claims of cultural oppression are the response. The liberalism of liberals is circumscribed by the buffered identity, by a hero-system, and this is what prevents the extension of their liberalism to conservatives. But as we will now see, what liberals excoriate as conservative pathologies must appear in a new light once that liberalism is extended.

* * *

Sowell observes that whereas many intellectuals looked upon Adlai Stevenson as a paragon of their ideals, interpreting his defeat to Eisenhower as a symptom of creeping anti-intellectualism, they condescendingly dismissed Truman as an ignorant simpleton who was in over his head. But the truth was that Stevenson could go for months or years without picking up a book while Truman voraciously consumed fare like Thucydides and Shakespeare and enjoyed Cicero in the original Latin. If the conventional wisdom of intellectuals was so off the mark, the explanation, argues Sowell, was that whereas Truman was “unpretentious and plainspoken,” Stevenson “had the rhetoric and airs of an intellectual” and so appealed to his fellow intellectuals’ vanity.¹⁷⁹ Sowell is not just taking a cheap shot at intellectuals but drawing our attention to something that could be expected to follow from the mutation counter-narrative and the origin of the modern liberal identity in a peculiarly courtly rationality. “The rhetoric and airs of an intellectual” are not mere personal pretensions, but *structural expressions* of a historically bequeathed hero-system. The reflexive adulation of Stevenson and the unfair belittlement of Truman reveals that the linguistic and behavioral conventions out of which the buffered identity originated can act upon liberals as automatic positive stimuli in just the same way that patriotism or traditional values can act upon conservatives—the *basic human symmetry* that conservative claims of cultural oppression are forever seeking to expose. As we saw with Gouldner, the New Class is a “flawed universal class.” And this susceptibility is at the origin of its flaws.

Mooney, we saw, attributes to liberals an evolved “need for cognition” and “need for accuracy,” as well as a need to distinguish themselves from the herd. But what are after all *needs* may also conduce

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), pg. 206-7.

to the “cognitive elitism” bewailed by Harris and other conservatives, yielding a culture in which those trained and groomed to bear the appropriate cultural markers are anointed as “intellectual” and accorded a deference that is withheld from others who do not uphold this culture. We know that our evolutionarily developed capacity for disgust can become culturally misdirected with the consequence that homosexuality becomes viewed with a visceral repugnance that would be more appropriate for telltale signs of bacterial infection. And I am arguing that the intellectualism of the liberal elites may be vulnerable to a similar kind of cultural misdirection. For just like disgust, our evolved “need for cognition” or “need for accuracy” as embedded in the angular cingulate cortex may have been culturally harnessed to imperatives that provide the desired neurological stimuli without providing the intellectual substance. Indeed, Mooney acknowledges that liberals find it “hard, psychologically” to buck what the scientists say. This inhibition is not the product of individual reflection, but rather a reflexive, socially inculcated responsiveness to “the rhetoric and airs of an intellectual,” to the language, style, and demeanor of the New Class, which symbolically articulate the original spiritual vision of the buffered distance.

Codevilla complains that “[f]or our Ruling Class, identity always trumps truth.”¹⁸⁰ And this might be dismissed as just a hollow *ad hominem*. But like all conservative claims of cultural oppression, Codevilla’s assertion carries a richer meaning in the context of the mutation counter-narrative. Thus understood, it is a reminder that our commitment to science arose, not out of any bare yearning for the truth, but as part and parcel of a contingent, historically constructed identity for which the scientific stance serves a spiritual function. As we observed with Taylor, the practitioners of science may understand themselves as “motivated fully by epistemic considerations,” but a “big part of the motivation resides in the prestige and admiration surrounding the [scientific] stance itself, with the sense of freedom, power, control, invulnerability, dignity, which it radiates.” And it is precisely this stance—the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity—that fuels liberals’ dismissive indignation toward conservative claimants of cultural oppression, who refuse to uphold this ethos as liberated human nature and must be discredited accordingly. In this way does identity trump truth, the truth of the mutation counter-narrative, of which conservatives have an under-theorized understanding. This understanding is being expressed when Codevilla notes that the “the notion that the common people’s words are, like grunts, mere signs of pain, pleasure, and frustration, is now axiomatic among our Ruling Class.”¹⁸¹ The reason is that those words do not respect the conventions of the peculiarly courtly rationality. And so

¹⁸⁰ Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Ruling Class: How They Corrupted America and What We Can Do About It* (Beauford Books 2010), pg. 13.

¹⁸¹ Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Ruling Class: How They Corrupted America and What We Can Do About It* (Beauford Books 2010), pg. 20-21.

they are assigned a merely animal status, mere grunts bereft of cognitive content. This judgment is simply a concomitant of the buffered identity, which must see its opponents in this way.

It must also *deny* that it is seeing them in this way, deny its own identitarian motivations. Operating out of a sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized hero-system, liberals can always proceed with plausible deniability, by relying on the unstated or understated mores of the liberal culture to make their case for them. Mary Midgely observes:

Probably few philosophers – or indeed other academics – ever realize how much of their influence is conveyed through expression and tone of voice, rather than through argument. Certain nuances of disappointment and contempt can often do more to direct a student than a ton of good argument.¹⁸²

Anyone who stands amazed – as most civilized people now do – at the fact that university departments of philosophy are today being steadily closed down in Britain might reflect that many of our current decision-makers, when young, made their first acquaintance with philosophy by hearing a superior voice drawl something like, ‘But what could that possibly mean?’ This kind of remark was not intended as a question, nor as an admission of ignorance, but as winning an argument and settling the whole issue. Merely not understanding what people said became for a time a safe passport to professional status.¹⁸³

Obviously, Midgely is describing a very specific social milieu with plenty of idiosyncrasies. Nevertheless, that milieu embodies with special clarity what conservatives understand to be a general feature of the liberal culture, a profound *disconnect* between its articulated self-conception—the “Open personality” embracing all of the liberal virtues—and another, only semi-conscious level of intonations and insinuations which convey a much more determinate set of values and understandings. And these are the values and understandings of the buffered identity, the way in which the liberal virtues have been inflected by the specific historical forces that brought this identity into being. If this parochialism can go unrecognized, this is owing to the sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized nature of the liberal hero-system. Whereas “Moral Order” is maintained through unabashed moralization, the buffered distance is maintained through “certain nuances of disappointment and contempt.” This is a layer of social meaning whose very existence is obscured by liberals Old Enlightenment rationalism, but it lies at the very heart of the liberal privilege that oppresses conservatives.

¹⁸² Mary Midgely, *Wisdom, Information, and Wonder: What is Knowledge for?* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pg. 101.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, pg. 188.

To the extent conservatives are anti-intellectual, one important reason is that the intellectualism of liberals is intimately bound up with these nuances of disappointment and contempt, which are ultimately expressions of the buffered distance. Given that the posture of intellectual detachment as it has developed in our culture carries an identitarian significance as the expression of an “original spiritual vision,” it may be psychologically difficult to embrace the detachment without also accepting the broader spiritual vision, which is why conservatives may reject the detachment. Giving the “insider’s perspective” on the Left’s playbook, David Kahane advises his “radical conservatives”:

[I]f we call you out and demand to know—which we will, you can bet on that, it’s part of the playbook—the details of your “plan,” laugh and tell them to shove it and start talking about principles. To do otherwise is to accept our premises, which means you have already lost. Instead, stick to the big picture: liberty, self-reliance, faith, freedom.¹⁸⁴

If conservatives cannot discuss the concrete details of policy without accepting the Left’s premises and surrendering the field from the outset, this is because to engage in disengaged deliberation may be to proceed down a slippery slope that will redound to the prestige of the buffered identity. In just the way that some inner-city black youth feel they cannot be good students because this would be to “act white” and thereby acquiesce in white supremacy, so some conservatives may feel that they cannot celebrate intellectualism without endorsing the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, without endorsing their own cultural oppression. In both case, the obstinacy originates in the group’s subordination before a dominant dispensation. The Ruling Class, writes Codevilla, “has established itself as the fount of authority, its primacy is based on habits of deference.”¹⁸⁵ And conservatives’ anti-intellectualism is before anything else an attempt to reverse these habits, to repudiate the social prestige that attaches to the “rhetoric and airs of the intellectual.” This is why Kahane would tell liberals to “shove it.” The “it” is the buffered identity, which is being inculcated *through* liberal intellectualism—just as it is inculcated through their anti-sexism, relativism, naturalism, and many other things, as we have seen.

Conservatives refuse to see liberal intellectualism in “innocently thin terms,” as mere logic and clarity, and rather intuit the thick accretions of cultural meaning in which the logic and clarity are silently embedded. This embeddedness is why Sowell can observe:

Just as people who criticize liberalism on the basis of the actual behavior of liberals are accused of being against liberalism in its dictionary definition, so people who criticize the actual behavior of intellectuals are often accused of being “anti-intellectual” in the sense of being against intellectual pursuits themselves. Richard Hofstadter’s well-known book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*

¹⁸⁴ David Kahane, *Rules for Radical Conservatives: Beat the Left at Its Own Game to Take Back America* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), pg. 255.

¹⁸⁵ Codevilla, *Ruling Class*, pg. 86.

equated the two things, both in its title and in its text, where he referred to “the national disrespect for mind” and “the qualities in our society that make intellect unpopular.”¹⁸⁶

If it is the actual behavior of intellectuals, and not disrespect for intellect as such, that has made intellectuals suspect in our culture, the reason is that this behavior has served to embed intellect in a particular identity—Lasch’s “cosmopolitanism of educated specialists”—which conservatives must oppose. As we observed with Dan Kahan, ostensibly hard-nosed empirical arguments for gun control or enhanced environmental regulation can be framed in a way that gratuitously exalts certain social identities over others, and thereby alienates some people from policies they could have otherwise endorsed. And my argument here is that something like this is transpiring with respect to the life of mind in general. Conservative anti-intellectualism is the predictable consequence of the *alienation that liberal intellectualism is designed to provoke*, a consequence of the “nuances of disappointment and contempt” through which that intellectualism announces itself to conservatives. While some conservatives will attempt to articulate and expose the hidden meaning of these nuances, many others will lack the wherewithal to do so, and so may be left with anti-intellectualism as their only recourse.

This socially-induced alienation is why Harris can argue that while the populist conservative may be mistaken to reject the theory of evolution, he is nevertheless virtuous in his refusal to believe anything which he cannot genuinely understand for himself—unlike the rest of us who repeat the theory that we are descended from monkeys “by rote as if we were descended from parrots.”¹⁸⁷ The scientists may be right. But given that only very few of us will ever have the time, patience, and background to grapple with the technical minutiae of evolutionary theory, the deference which the scientists as a matter of fact receive originates in the cultural prestige of the scientific outlook within the liberal culture. To attack that prestige is therefore to resist the liberal culture and its disciplines. And this is what conservative anti-intellectualism is designed to do. We are, writes Harris, “better off for having in our midst a large segment of the population who refuses to act intelligently,” people “who won’t listen to what the scientists tell them even when the scientists are right,” because this “irrational resistance to a scientific outlook on life” is the only way to “prevent a world in which no other outlook is conceivable.”¹⁸⁸ The liberal, unlike the populist conservative, “acts intelligently.” And *acting* is indeed the operative word, because it signifies conservatives’ intuitive awareness that liberalism has been built atop a historically constructed identity, a hero-system that is always being *acted out* in social life. This is what the conservative populist rejects

¹⁸⁶Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, pg. 219.

¹⁸⁷ Lee Harris, *The Next American Civil War: The Populist Revolt Against the Liberal Elite* (New York,: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pg. 179.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., pg. 180.

when he acts unintelligently. Acting unintelligently is the *price* he is willing to pay in order to resist this identity, in order to preserve the anarchic will of free men against the technocratic values of the ruling liberal elites. And so this is a price that liberalism itself has exacted from him.

The “children of the Enlightenment” cannot recognize their own complicity in fomenting conservative anti-intellectualism. But this is what follows from the critical theory of the Right, the mirror image of the critical theory of the Left. Drawing on Jacques Derrida, Chantal Mouffe argues that while our Enlightenment prejudices dispose us to see identities as pure “presence” or “objectivity,” they are in fact constituted by “acts of exclusion.” Power is not “an external relation taking place between two preconstituted identities” and rather inheres in the identities themselves, identities that have been shaped by a “constitutive outside” created through these acts of exclusion.¹⁸⁹ Liberals commit precisely this error when they mistake conservative anti-intellectualism for a pure “presence.” For they believe that this anti-intellectualism is just an intrinsic feature of the conservative personality, or the conservative amygdala, something that liberals just come across in conservative individuals. But this anti-intellectualism is in fact a *byproduct*, and *not* the cause, of conservative resistance to liberalism and its peculiarly courtly rationality. It has been shaped by “acts of exclusion,” the nuances of disappointment and contempt through which the liberal culture targets conservatism and conservatives. What liberals believe is their intellectual superiority is not a merely an “external relation” with the intellectually inferior conservatives but rather the *product of power relations* that liberals will not acknowledge. Conservative anti-intellectualism is simply what may become of more porous selves within a civilizational framework dominated by the buffered identity, a function of the ways in which this identity cultivates certain human potentialities while suppressing others.

Conservatives *are* different from liberals, as Mooney insists. But as Catherine MacKinnon notes, differences are “inequality’s post hoc excuse, its conclusory artifact, its outcome presented as its origin, the damage that is pointed to as the justification for doing the damage after the damage has been done.”¹⁹⁰ The irrationalities of conservative claimants of cultural oppression are adduced as justifications for liberal attitudes. But they are themselves the *products* of liberal attitudes. While many conservatives will dismiss the stereotype of conservatives as anti-intellectual as just liberal prejudice, it is more accurate to say that this prejudice is so powerful as to have become something more than a prejudice, as to have become truth, something that liberal domination has forced some conservatives to internalize. Foucault

¹⁸⁹ Chantal Mouffe, “Democracy Power, and the ‘Political,’” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pg.

¹⁹⁰ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), pg. 8.

writes that “[e]ach society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth,” the types of discourse which that politics “accepts and makes function as true.”¹⁹¹ The truths of liberalism are made to “function as true” because, like any artificial social hierarchy, liberalism generates its own “truth” by progressively debilitating those who would challenge it. Just as racism can “create” black criminality by limiting blacks’ educational and economic opportunities and sexism can “create” femininity by enforcing female subservience, so liberalism creates conservative anti-intellectualism. This of course comports fully with the “vision of the anointed” and its “pattern of seeking differentiation at virtually all costs.” For conservative anti-intellectualism provides liberals with a constant backdrop of benightedness against which their own thoughtfulness and reflectiveness may be highlighted—the *Other* in relation to which Mill’s “progressive beings” may define themselves as such. This is the “total context” of conservative anti-intellectualism, the “mitigating circumstances” that should serve to discredit liberal stereotypes about conservatives—just as the fact of historic racism should serve to discredit conservative stereotypes about blacks. If liberals refuse to acknowledge these mitigating circumstances notwithstanding their claims to sociological sophistication, this is because identity has triumphed over truth, just as Codevilla says.

* * *

Wherever we look, the facially outlandish paranoia of conservative claims of cultural oppression has as its “root cause” the fact that intuitions pertaining to a supra-epistemological realm of human experience are being articulated through the epistemological framework which has been imposed upon them. And this works to discredit those intuitions notwithstanding that they originate in the truth of the mutation counter-narrative. As we saw in Chapter 2, Goldberg charges that liberals conceal the ideological content of “social justice.” By presenting social justice as an ineffable, Jedi-like force, they make it “impossible to argue with their most basic ideas.” This charge may be false if interpreted epistemologically, as the accusation that liberals will not acknowledge the values that drive them. To the extent liberals’ values may sometimes go unacknowledged, this is for the same reason that conservatives’ values may sometimes go unacknowledged, because they are being taken for granted in the discussion at hand and not because they are being somehow concealed. But Goldberg’s charge *becomes* true once interpreted on the level of cosmological orientation, on a level that is deeper than deeply held belief. The disingenuousness which Goldberg viscerally senses in liberals pertains, not to the values that underlie liberals’ assessments of the facts, but to the cosmological orientation that underlies their values, to the

¹⁹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pg. 73.

disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. This is why the content of “social justice” need never be revealed, because it ultimately refers to an ethos that does not need to be articulated in order to be understood and acted upon.

If it is impossible to argue with the Left’s most basic ideas, this is owing to the fact that, as Taylor says, “you can’t go on digging under our ordinary representations to uncover further, more basic representations,” because “[w]hat you get underlying our representations of the world—the kinds of things we formulate, for instance, in declarative sentences—is not further representations but rather a certain grasp of the world that we have as agents in it.” This grasp is our cosmological orientations. The ever-elusive “most basic ideas” of the Left cannot be argued with, not because they are being disingenuously concealed, but because *they are not ideas at all*. For the Jedi-like force that seems to accompany the liberal invocation of social justice is simply the secularized asceticism of the buffered identity, the invisible taken-for-granted backdrop of liberal ideals. The disingenuousness of liberalism is simply the disingenuousness of naturalizing that identity as essential human nature. But this is precisely the argument which the epistemological framework does not allow conservatives to make—the reason why conservative claims of cultural oppression are no more than an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges.” Hence liberalism’s perennial rhetorical supremacy, a simple consequence of the fact that it requires nothing short of the ultimate in sophistication to truly understand conservative claims of cultural oppression.

Helen Rittelmeyer was attempting to circumvent this problem when she, as discussed in Chapter 2, decided to forgo arguing for conservative values and instead sought to embody them by smoking at Yale, as a rebellion against the university’s “moral consensus that the two most important things in life are for everyone to be happy and for everyone to get along.” Though Rittelmeyer could not articulate the ultimate meaning of her rebellion, the moral consensus she was repudiating was in fact “order of mutual benefit” created by the ordering impulses of the buffered identity, which conservatives are always resisting in one way or another. For the smoke Rittelmeyer was introducing into the world was the very same anti-structure that other conservatives seek to produce verbally, through arguments and accusations. Recognizing that the ostensible issues are always secondary to cosmological orientation, she resolved to provide the latter with a more direct expression through smoking, the social meaning of which is that liberalism rests atop a contingent, culturally parochial ethos by which she will not be beguiled.

Resentful and reactive conservative claims of cultural oppression may be, but this resentment and reactivity are being deployed as an inarticulate protest against that which liberalism itself refuses to articulate, which is its own cosmological orientation and the costs it portends for conservatives. These

claims may seem histrionic and contrived. But this is because they seek to promote the *Other* of the buffered distance, pre-modern anti-structure, the drama, boastful self-assertion, recalcitrance, and inflexibility that have been excluded from every preferred basket of liberal values. Corey Robin observes:

Conservatives usually style themselves as chastened skeptics holding the line against political enthusiasm. Where radicals tilt toward the utopian, conservatives settle for world-weary realism. But, in reality, conservatives have been temperamentally antagonistic, politically insurgent, and utterly opposed to established moral convention. Ever since Edmund Burke, thinkers from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Martin Heidegger have sought a more intense, almost ecstatic mode of experience in the spheres of religion, culture, and even the economy—all of which, they believe, are repositories of the mysterious and ineffable.¹⁹²

This contradiction becomes intelligible, and is indeed dissolved as a contradiction, within the mutation counter-narrative. To the extent conservatives hold themselves out as world-weary stalwarts defending tradition against newfangled moral fashions, this is because that tradition represents a less thoroughgoing iteration of the buffered identity. To the extent they instead seek out a “more intense, almost ecstatic mode of experience”—Breitbart’s “almost druglike and ethereal and divine exultation”—this is in expression of the underlying impulse, the prerogatives of pre-modern porousness opened out to anti-structure. Conservative claimants of cultural oppression can feel at ease incorporating the anti-bourgeois temper of the Left into their conservatism because their claims are a mere *means* for expressing something—resistance to the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity—that is irreducible to conservatism as such.

This is why Anderson’s *South Park Conservatives* can in one chapter celebrate the coarseness and sometimes scatological vulgarity of an emerging brand of conservative comedy and in another celebrate the growing number of college students who have, resisting prevailing sexual mores on campus, taken a resolute stand in favor of sexual abstinence, refusing to “grow” despite the pressures being leveled at them.¹⁹³ Though superficially incompatible, the two tenors cohere as expressions of resistance to the forces of humanistic normalization, the basic impetus of conservative claims of cultural oppression, which harness traditionalism and anti-traditionalism alike in their own service. Liberals assume that these claims are just a reactionary effort to “turn back the clock.” But claiming cultural oppression can become a *sui generis*, self-propelling passion that can supplement, and may even *supplant*, whatever reactionary motivations are in play. While some conservatives may claim cultural oppression in order to more effectively advance a conservative agenda, others may have been drawn toward a conservative agenda *in*

¹⁹² Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford University Press 2011), pg. 113.

¹⁹³ Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005), pgs. 75-100, 139-62.

order to claim cultural oppression, because conservatism has become the only medium through which the onward march of the civilizing process may be resisted. Conservatism is the socially acceptable guise this resistance has been forced to assume, and to recognize this is to achieve the ultimate in sophistication.

Chapter Eight

A Pragmatic Contradiction

This ultimate in sophistication may not have a direct logical bearing on the various arguments for or against, say, abortion rights or gay rights. But nor is it irrelevant to understanding how these disagreements proceed in the real world. For it permits us to recognize that the arguments transpire within a matrix of social meanings that structures how they speak to people's identities. The contemporary "culture wars" are a contemporary reenactment of the mutation counter-narrative, of the struggles through which the modern emerged from out of the pre-modern. The reenactment transpires, not in the substance of the various controversies, but in the *structural* relationships between opposing positions, which place the antagonists in what are latter-day reiterations of old roles, as either uprooted elites seeking to impose new forms of social, moral, intellectual, and religious discipline or else as "folk" struggling to protect their traditions against these encroachments. This is why a first-order, topic-based culture war about the "issues" could have engendered a second-order, identity-based culture war addressing the hierarchical relationship between those who debate these issues, liberal elites and ordinary Americans. The sharp contrasts invoked by these polemics may oversimplify and overdramatize. But they are over-dramatizations of what is a genuine drama, oversimplifications with an underlying subject-matter. This is what liberals fail to recognize but what I have been seeking to elucidate.

As we saw in an earlier chapter, Nunberg believes that conservatives must caricature liberals as motivated by social pretension, dilettantism, or effete sentimentality because this is the only way to discredit people who are not obviously motivated by self-interest. But I have been arguing that these caricatures in fact originate in conservatives' naturalistic intuition that the ostensible issues are an arena for a contest of hero-systems, which is what conservatives discern and liberals overlook. Taylor observes:

The rational agent, who is capable of seeing that self-love and the social are the same, and designing a social order on this basis, has already stepped way beyond the narrow point of view of the single being that he, she is. As an agent of instrumental reason, he/she stands at the point of view of the whole, and is moved by the greatness and design of the whole. Theorists sometimes commit a kind of pragmatic contradiction in not taking account, in their theory of the human agent, of the motives which actuate them as theorists and overall planners. But this mode of transcendence is still there, and one of the motive forces behind their position.¹

The "pragmatic contradiction" of theorists is also the pragmatic contradiction of liberals, and it originates in the fact that the narrowly moral arguments with which they defend their positions silently invoke a

¹Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 231-32.

culturally thicker narrative that pits those who have realized the buffered distance against those who have not, casting liberals as possessed of agency powers unavailable to conservatives still mired in the “promptings of the senses” and the “consolations of the enchanted world.” Liberals may see themselves as just “agents of instrumental reason.” But then they see themselves in innocently thin terms, because their instrumental reason promotes a distinct “mode of transcendence” that conservatives are always sensing in the subtle undertones of liberal arguments. The New Class subverts many traditional inequalities. But as we saw with Gouldner, “silently inaugurates a new hierarchy of the knowing, the knowledgeable, the reflexive and insightful.” The elitism of liberals consists in this hierarchy, which is the product, not of any personal pretensions, but of the historical forces that brought the modern liberal identity into being. This hierarchy is irreducible to the superiority of liberal ideas and opinions, because it ultimately speaks to the *superiority of liberals as human agents*, the presumption that liberals enjoy a more self-transparent and self-regulating form of agency and that conservatism betrays a deficit of properly realized agency powers. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are a reaction to this presumption—to the *one hierarchy with which liberalism cannot dispense*.

John Wilson argues that conservatives have endlessly recycled a set of powerful but often misleading and one-sided anecdotes in a “ritualistic invocation of the image of leftist thought police,” most of which prove to be unsupported by the less dramatic factual details of events.² There may be a few grains of truth scattered throughout the conservative critique. But conservatives’ harrowing accounts of life under liberal tyranny seem lacking in any sense of proportion. Savage writes that “whether they know it or not, most of our thought therapists have become part of” a “one-world agenda” that exploits “seemingly genuine issues to establish control over our minds and our lives,” to “make us all obedient, politically correct automatons, with similar thoughts in a uniform world where we can be conveniently herded by unicom masters.”³ Savage’s language of choice may not be representative of all conservatives. But his conclusions do follow from the kinds of things most conservatives say, crystallizing the aura of *unreality* which they already exude to liberals.

However, I have been arguing that conservative claims of cultural oppression as ordinarily formulated are distorted articulations of intuitions originating in an under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative. And what conservatives intuit is the existence of a basic hierarchy between those who have achieved the buffered distance and therefore possess “awareness” and those who have

² John K. Wilson, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education* (Duke University Press, 1995), pg. xv.

³ Michael Savage, *The Savage Nation: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on Our Borders, Language, and Culture* (Plume 2002), pg. 36.

not and therefore lack it. This hierarchy is never officially acknowledged, but it is communicated at a visceral level that conservatives cannot ignore. While conservative claims of cultural oppression may indulge in hyperbole and caricature, they are ultimately responding to something *real*. For the “one-world agenda” feared by Savage is the buffered distance, the historically constructed understanding of human agency that liberalism and the ideology of the subtraction account cannot acknowledge.

I will now illustrate these observations by examining a variety of controversies, in order to reveal the ways in which the ostensible issues recurrently embody this pragmatic contradiction between liberalism as set of universalistic ideals and liberalism as a hero-system, between liberal ideals and the various forms of illiberalism that their inculcation presupposes. Section 1 begins with a general examination of why conservatives believe that liberal morality is “thicker” than liberals can recognize. Having laid this groundwork, I will then proceed through a number of “case studies” covering an array of issues, including gay rights, feminism, distributive justice, criminal responsibility, racism, and progressive education. Though the surface issues here are as distinct as they come, we shall see that these surfaces disguise subterranean layers of social meaning all of which have been created by the same basic conflict.

1. Meta-Censoriousness

As we have already seen, conservatives are driven on by the inexorable conviction that liberalism is not to be taken at face value, because what it holds out as its transcendence of conservatives’ moralistic collectivism is just another moralistic collectivism in disguise. Goldberg, for example, argues that environmentalism gives license to the kind of moral bullying that would be denounced as totalitarian were it motivated by traditional values.⁴ And as we already saw, Himmelfarb believes that the allegedly repressive mores of the Victorians have been replaced, not by freedom and tolerance, but by a “New Victorianism.” This is a “moralistic paternalism” that seeks to prohibit “hate speech,” “sexual harassment,” and “date rape” by requiring “employees, students, and professors to attend ‘sensitivity’ and ‘consciousness-raising’ sessions to correct their supposed racism, sexism, and homophobia.”⁵ In a similar vein, Bork accuses that the liberal elites seek to normalize what has traditionally been considered deviant conduct—crime, illegitimacy, and drug use—while “growing intensely moralistic and disapproving about what has always been thought normal behavior.” Liberalism has redefined “what we mean by such

⁴ Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pg. 19.

⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pg. 259.

things as child abuse, rape, and racial and sexual discrimination so that behavior until recently thought quite normal, unremarkable, even benign, is now identified as blameworthy or even criminal.”⁶

These points can be framed in a variety of ways. But conservatives all agree with Theodore Dalrymple when he writes that reading Mill and absorbing his credo does not automatically extinguish the “desire to interfere in the lives of others.” There exists, argues Dalrymple, a law of the “conservation of righteous indignation,” akin to the law of thermodynamics. And this entails that “[a]s traditional moral prohibitions, inhibitions, and considerations are destroyed by the gnawing criticism of philosophical disputatiousness, new ones rush in to fill the vacuum.”⁷ Liberalism represents, not any bare elimination, or even net reduction, of moralistic censoriousness, but merely its rechanneling toward novel causes. Liberals have merely adopted a “second-level censoriousness” or “meta-censoriousness,”⁸ targeting the devotees of traditional morality with the same moralistic fervor for which these devotees are routinely condemned. Dalrymple’s metaphor from physics captures what I have argued is conservatives’ intuitive naturalistic understanding of human agency, their sense that certain unyielding human constants are lying underneath the sophisticated surface rationalizations, which conceal unacknowledged symmetries between liberals and conservatives.

Conservative claims of cultural oppression seek to expose these symmetries. Thus, Hadley Arkes dismisses as a “liberal cliché” the notion “that we are too divided on moral questions such as abortion, and when we are divided, it would be improper for legislators to legislate, for we lack common standards of judgment.” How, on this principle, could liberals have supported the Civil War amendments or the Civil Rights Act of 1964, given the deep public divisions they inspired? Liberals invoke the principle of consensus to rule certain conservative policies out of bounds. But Arkes believes that this principle is a philosophical castle in the air, because there exists no consensus that we may not legislate on matters about which we have not achieved consensus: Given that “no one who invokes that rule of consensus claims to know it as a rule on the strength of a consensus,” that rule is being offered “as something that seems to be true or fitting in itself.”⁹ Arkes’s central point is that *both* liberals and conservatives arrive at their moralities in this way and that liberals’ claims to cognitive superiority on this front are therefore

⁶ Robert H. Bork, *Slouching toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Regan Books, 2003), pg. 3.

⁷ Theodore Dalrymple, *In Praise of Prejudice: The Necessity of Preconceived Ideas* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), pgs. 69-69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 119.

⁹ Hadley Arkes, *Liberalism and the Law*, in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), pg. 115.

without foundation. Whatever their argumentative sophistication, that sophistication originates in a bare intuition of the good. Conservatives are simply more honest about their motivations. In a similar vein, Jean Bethke Elshtain complains that Rawls's "public reason" is defined tautologically as the reason acceptable to all "reasonable and rational" persons. Whatever their diverse worldviews, citizens must be ready "to explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse." But public reason is in fact a liberal ruse, argues Elshtain. Given that it is unreasonable to expect adherents of vastly discrepant worldviews to agree about what constitutes reasonable argument, public reason is just a way to exclude religious reason giving without appearing bigoted. Though paraded as "neutrality," liberals' demand for "reasonableness" disguises a "liberal monism" that "values certain aspects and features of the human condition and despises and belittles others."¹⁰ Liberals would accuse conservatives of narrow-minded intolerance, but their own version of that intolerance can always be found lurking underneath their sophisticated intellectual constructs.

However, where conservatives see a covert sectarianism, liberals see false equivalencies. Liberals believe that what conservatives hold out as their insight into liberalism's subterranean agenda rests on a set of interlocking conceptual confusions about the actual content of a sophisticated liberalism, which conservatives have caricatured beyond recognition. Conservative arguments are directed at straw men, without which they would not survive. As we will now see, this disagreement cannot be understood in purely intellectual terms. For here as elsewhere, the ultimate in sophistication reveals that what appears like a theoretical disagreement is in fact a clash of cosmological orientation that cannot be resolved theoretically. We will now see 1) why liberals believe that the conservative argument rests on false equivalencies, and 2) how the mutation counter-narrative endows these equivalencies with a truth with which the liberal argument fails to reckon.

* * *

Conservatives believe that in opposing the legal enforcement of morality, liberals overlook the toddler's truth that every law is premised, not only on facts, but also on values. As Justice White memorably wrote in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, upholding the constitutionality of anti-sodomy statutes, the "law is constantly based on notions of morality, and if all laws representing essentially moral choices are to be invalidated under the Due Process Clause, the courts will be very busy indeed."¹¹ Whatever its appeal,

¹⁰ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *The Bright Line: Liberalism and Religion*, in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), pg. 149.

¹¹ *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186 (U.S. 1986)

the principle that the state may never “legislate morality,” could never be applied consistently, and is therefore being invoked selectively in order to judicially preempt particular moral judgments which liberals happen to dislike.

However, the liberal responds that the confusion which the conservative imputes to liberalism is in fact his own confusion, a product of his failure to make distinctions that any rational being can recognize. Scruton believes he detects a human constant when he confesses that “[l]ike all political beings, conservatives are for certain things: they are for them, not because they have arguments in their favour, but because they know them, live with them, and find their identity threatened (often they know not how) by the attempt to interfere with their operation.”¹² But liberals believes that this announced willingness to act on visceral sentiment in disregard of the arguments collapses what Ronald Dworkin observes is the crucial distinction between morality in the *anthropological* sense and morality in the *discriminatory* sense. Though we sometimes understand “morals” or “moral convictions” as referring to “whatever attitudes the group displays about the propriety of human conduct, qualities, or goals,” we also recognize that morality thus understood may rest on mere prejudice or aversion, and so contrast morality in this merely anthropological sense with the morality that can be defended by reasons.¹³ This is morality in the discriminatory sense, a morality that can be distinguished from mere prejudice or emotion. And this, argues Dworkin, requires that our positions be derived from some broader principle or theory which we are prepared to apply consistently.¹⁴ Genuinely moral judgment is not a matter of isolated intuitions, however viscerally felt or popularly held, but of a “small set of very general standards” either explicitly avowed or implicit in one’s pattern of argument. And positions that are not derivable from these can be dismissed as arbitrary.¹⁵ They may be moral in the anthropological sense, certainly, but not in the discriminatory sense.

This distinction appears to eliminate the contradiction that conservatives believe they detect in liberalism. Liberals who oppose “enforcing morality” do not oppose enforcing morality in the broadest sense alluded to by Justice White. Rather, they stand opposed to the enforcement of morality that is merely anthropological and does not satisfy the requirements of discriminatory morality. For the alternative would be, as Jeffrie Murphy puts it, to allow the majority “to do whatever it jolly well feels like—so long, at any rate, as it remembers to use the word ‘morality’ somewhere in its supposed

¹² Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), pg. 2.

¹³ Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pg. 248.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 249.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 252.

justification.”¹⁶ This is what liberals oppose when they oppose “enforcing morality.” Liberals who declare this opposition are merely conceding the meaning of the term “morality” to conservatives, who understand morality anthropologically, as a matter of traditional mores. They are not advocating for some impossible value-free political regime. And in defending the “enforcement of morality,” conservatives are not just making the obvious point that some value judgments are inescapable but, more controversially, announcing their willingness to accept their subjective feelings as self-legitimizing—as valid merely because they “know them” and “live with them,” as Scruton says. This is the crucial asymmetry that conservatives’ false equivalencies have to overlook.

Many liberals believe that any properly discriminatory morality contains an *empirical* element that distinguishes it from the merely sectarian preferences that make up conservative values. Arguing that “bare assertions of public morality” do not create a rational state interest under equal protection review, Peter Cicchino distinguishes legitimate arguments from “public welfare” from illegitimate ones from “public morality.” Arguments from public morality are unacceptable because they posit “a legitimate government interest in prohibiting or encouraging certain kinds of human behavior without any empirical connection to goods other than the alleged good of eliminating or increasing, as the case may be, the behavior at issue.”¹⁷ Moral argument that proceeds without reference to the conduct’s measurable causal impact upon some empirically discernible good—for example, the claim that homosexuality is harmful because it is “unnatural”—fails to state a legally cognizable claim about the conduct, because it has not established an empirically verifiable connection between the conduct and the empirically observable effects of regulating it. By contrast, legitimate arguments from public *welfare* “defend a law by asserting that the law avoids harms or realizes goods other than the good of eliminating or increasing the behavior or characteristic that defines the classification the law creates -- for example, health, safety, or economic prosperity.”¹⁸ Public welfare arguments have an empirical quality and can therefore be debated by people coming from very different worldviews. None will dispute that preserving life, preventing, disease, ending hunger, and eliminating poverty are good things. People may disagree about the naturalness of homosexuality. But when it comes to punishing homosexuality, “even the most ardent opponent of homosexuality would grant that being fired from a job or losing custody of a child are evils for those who experience those things.”¹⁹ Public morality is merely anthropological while public

¹⁶ Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Moral Reasons and the Limitation of Liberty*, 40 Wm and Mary L. Rev. 947, 952 (1999).

¹⁷ Peter M. Cicchino, *Reason and the Rule of Law: Should Bare Assertions of “Public Morality” Qualify as Legitimate Government Interests for the Purposes of Equal Protection Review*, 87 Geo. L.J. 139, 140 (1998).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pg.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pg.

welfare is discriminatory, because public welfare operates under these principles while public morality seems unconstrained by any principles at all.

Cicchino does not deny that what he calls “public welfare” can be described as a “morality” in the broadest, most generic sense of the term²⁰—that is, in the sense invoked by Justice White. But it does not follow that “public welfare” is just another sectarian vision on an equal footing with the public morality of conservatives. An argument from public morality holding that “the penis and vagina are somehow uniquely and exclusively intended for human sexual intercourse” may be theologically appealing to some. But this “organ teleology” is simply “outside the realm of publicly accessible discourse in a pluralistic democracy,” and can exert no appeal on those who do not already share it.²¹ It will never command universal assent in a pluralistic democracy like our own, where citizens are divided by irreconcilable differences on the nature of the good life.²² By contrast with the essentially private and subjective nature of public morality, public welfare involves “a dialogue with human experience -- an inventory and assessment of the observable effects that a given act of government will likely have on human flourishing in the real world.”²³ Because only tangible harms and benefits are rooted in that human experience, the requirement that legislation be defended by reference to it functions as a check against the legal enforcement of any merely sectarian agendas. We have seen this before: The distinction between “public welfare” and “public morality” is just another way to place a check on anthropocentricity. If public welfare is non-sectarian as public morality is not, this is because it concerns itself only with goods whose value does not appear to derive from any particular hero-system. And this, it seems, is precisely what Scruton and other conservatives refuse to do.

Defending Justice White’s position in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, Bork dismisses the standard liberal refrain about the centrality of consent:

There is no objection to the torturing of puppies for pleasure except that it outrages our morality. There is, indeed, no objection to forcible rape in the home or to the sexual abuse of a child there, except a moral objection. But, it will be said, those cases do not involve consent or do not involve a consent the person is mature enough to give intelligently. Those are not objections to the comparison. They are merely statements that the speaker perceives a moral distinction in consent. But the perception of a moral distinction does not affect the point being made that morality, standing alone, is a sufficient rationale to support legislation.”²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., pg.

²¹ Ibid., pg.

²² Ibid., pg.

²³ Ibid., pg.

²⁴ Robert H. Bork, *The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1990), pg. 124.

Like Justice White and Roger Scruton, Bork is conveying conservatives' basic rejection of the anthropological/discriminatory distinction embraced by Dworkin and other liberals. As conservatives see it, moral intuitions rooted in general principles addressing broad categories of actions—like abrogations of individual autonomy—are intellectually symmetrical with insular, self-contained moral intuitions addressing discrete behaviors, like the unnaturalness of homosexual sodomy. Both sorts of claims, Bork is suggesting, originate in a raw, axiomatic intuition that a given act or range of acts is immoral, and this places them on the same plane. As Craig Carr puts the point, “[t]he conservative defense of decency, on the one hand, and the liberal defense of autonomy, on the other, simply display differing moral beliefs about what kinds of things should matter greatly to society in general.”²⁵

But liberals disagree. In dismissing autonomy as just another social preference, Carr overlooks liberalism's core insight that autonomy is, as Lawrence Becker says, “an incomparable, unique, and superlative good.”²⁶ Autonomy is not something to be “balanced” against other considerations and can only be limited in order to preserve the autonomy of others.²⁷ Conservatives' posited symmetry between decency and autonomy fails because:

Consider the limiting case: a conception of the good life as one of subordination, or the forfeiture of autonomy—to God, nation, family, or whatever. It is plausible to think that the value of such a life for the person involved will come from the perceived righteousness, nobility, exhilaration, or pleasure of the life so lived—of the sustained, purposive living of a subordinated life. That means preserving the value of such a life will involve the preservation of autonomy in a fairly strong form, a form in which one persistently acquiesces to being dominated.²⁸

Bork's “speaker” who “perceives a moral distinction in consent” is not registering just another moral preference, but rather acknowledging a principle that anyone can recognize upon reflection. And this is that autonomy is the *sine qua non* of realizing whatever other values we believe in, and whether or not we consider autonomy to be an intrinsic value. Religious fundamentalists may not celebrate autonomous self-determination as the highest good. But they do not need to do so in order to appreciate that autonomy represents an incommensurable instrumental value for pursuing whatever they do hold as the highest good. This is why autonomy is not just another value that “seems true or fitting in itself,” as Arkes would say, because it is a second-order meta-value that is presupposed by ordinary first-order values.

²⁵ Craig L. Carr, *Between Virtue and Vice: The Legal Enforcement of Morals*, 14-FALL Kan. J. L. & Pub. Pol'y 1, 20 (2004).

²⁶ Lawrence C. Becker, *Crimes Against Autonomy: Gerald Dworkin on the Enforcement of Morality*, 40 Wm and Mary L. Rev. 959, 966 (1999).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 967.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 969.

Gerald Dworkin writes that the morality that liberalism would enforce is one concerned with “the protection of autonomy and respect for persons,” and excludes as legally unenforceable those parts of morality consisting in “various ideals, such as ideals of virtue and character, certain ideals of fairness or fittingness, and ideals of sexual conduct.”²⁹ And the reason for this is that by contrast with autonomy “ideals of fittingness” are merely the *contents* of the different ways in which different people employ their autonomy, and so presuppose this broader, more encompassing meta-value, which is acknowledged even in the breach. This is why autonomy can ground a public morality. One cannot pursue one’s conception of the good without concomitantly recognizing the special status of autonomy, and one cannot having done this rationally deny that autonomy to others. If conservatives by contrast are content to act on values merely because they know them and live them, this is because they refuse to “step back” from their ideals of fittingness—subordination to “God, nation, family, or whatever” as Becker says—onto a higher plane of abstraction that relativizes these commitments to the meta-value of autonomy. *This* is the sophisticated liberalism that conservatives have caricatured beyond recognition.

* * *

To be fair, though, liberals are also guilty of inviting these caricatures upon themselves. Macedo observes that there exists a certain tendency, both within popular culture and among some theorists to celebrate a certain “nonjudgmental, unqualified pluralism.”³⁰ And this kind of liberalism is disingenuousness inasmuch as it “presuppose[s] orderings of moral values and accounts of political virtue without taking responsibility for articulating those civic values, defending them, and offering accounts of how these values should be promoted.”³¹ This disingenuousness exposes liberalism to a twin-set of charges. On the one hand, liberalism is accused of “weak-kneed neutralism” and “moral squeamishness” for its failure to defend any substantive values concerning the nature of the good life.³² But since liberalism is necessarily more judgmental in practice than in its amorphous declarations of a lofty pluralism, it is, from the other side, exposed to the charge that it is really a partisan philosophy, and so essentially no different from the many sectarian agendas above which it seeks to elevate itself,³³ a “Trojan horse” for a comprehensive conception of the good.³⁴

²⁹ Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, pg. 930.

³⁰ Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pg. 151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 26.

³² *Ibid.*, pg. 124-25.

³³ *Ibid.*, pg. 185.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 227.

However, Macedo argues that these opposite yet conceptually intertwined vulnerabilities attach, not to the best version of liberalism, but to its perversion.³⁵ And the solution is to assume responsibility for and defend the substantive values which underlie, and determine the scope of, our pluralistic ideals. This is what I have just undertaken to do. And this examination has revealed that, to the extent conservatives can dismiss “liberal neutrality” as manifestly unrealistic and disingenuous, this is only because of some liberals’ overly facile rhetoric, which perverts the intellectual core of true liberalism. But undistorted, that core tells us that while liberal political morality may be “thicker” than is indicated by irresponsibly loose talk of a “nonjudgmental, unqualified pluralism,” it remains “thinner” than the traditional moralisms that conservatives mistakenly believe are symmetrical with liberalism. Whether it be called “neutrality” or something else, liberalism’s relative thickness/thinness is not the artifice of any parochial cultural preferences, but the logical product of distinctions that conservatives themselves will not straightforwardly reject. Martha Nussbaum writes:

Political liberals are not skeptics: they do not hold that no position is better than any other. They simply hold that many disagreements are reasonable disagreements among reasonable people. This being the case, it is right for political society to respect those differences, as a part of what respect for persons requires. This respect for difference, however, does not lead the liberal to believe that political life should be value-free. On the contrary, respect for persons is a very basic *value* about which the political liberals are not in the least neutral. And it has implications for many other aspects of political society.³⁶

Political liberalism asks us to value certain basic rights and liberties for all citizens. It also asks us to value certain “primary goods” that are prerequisites for leading a flourishing life. So it is easy to see that such a liberalism will have a strong interest in laws that protect those rights and liberties for all citizens, and also in laws that protect other primary goods, such as property. Laws against homicide, rape, and theft are natural expressions of the overlapping consensus....³⁷

Whether or not he opts to characterize liberalism as “morally neutral,” the liberal can concede that there exists *a sense* in which moral neutrality is a foolish and confused idea. For any political philosophy must uphold certain values to the exclusion of others. But even if ideals like tolerance, nonjudgmentalism, and neutrality are incoherent when interpreted as the transparently discreditable imposture of a view from nowhere, the liberal believes that, conceptualized at *another* level, these ideals admit of a construal that is neither confused nor impracticable nor disingenuous. This is what Nussbaum is seeking to describe, values that are in one way or another implicit in our common sense notions of morality and civility, which point us toward the “common ground” that liberals identify as “reasonable.” A conservative like Elshtain

³⁵ Ibid., pg. 125.

³⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2004), pg. 60.

³⁷ Ibid., pg. 62.

may ultimately be correct that “any endorsement of rules and procedures is a substantive one that embraces, if only tacitly, some version of a good life in contrast to some other.”³⁸ But this hidden moral substance is not just another sectarian preference, because it is founded on values—respect for persons, tolerance for reasonable disagreement, and the special status of “primary goods”—that any reasonable person can recognize.

Conservative attacks on the covert sectarianism of the liberal culture seem disingenuous because they disregard all the *moral* distinctions we have just examined. Goldberg believes that environmentalists engage in the kind of moral bullying that would be condemned as totalitarian if engaged in by traditionalists. But this overlooks the fact that whereas traditionalists bully in the name of public morality, environmentalists “bully” in the name of public welfare. And this is why liberal “bullying” can be subjected to rational critique as traditionalist bullying cannot. For only the former involves a “dialogue with human experience.” *This* is why liberals do not see environmentalists as bullies. It is also why the New Victorianism is not as Himmelfarb imagines just a new set of arbitrary mores on a par with the Old Victorianism. For the Old Victorianism sought to enforce certain “ideals of fittingness”—subordination to “God, nation, family, or whatever.” By contrast, the consciousness-raising and sensitivity training upheld by the New Victorians promote the meta-values of autonomy and respect for persons, which conservatives will not baldly reject. Bork may be correct that liberalism attaches new valences to traditional virtues and vices. But this reflects, not the conservation of righteous indignation, but a commitment to public welfare, whose meaning must always be revised in light of the empirical evidence. To the extent things like rape and discrimination are now defined more expansively than before, this is because they are now understood in the context of the social power relations that were formerly ignored. Conservatives can agree or disagree with these kinds of argument. But their disagreement, and even the *correctness* of their disagreement, does not eliminate the basic asymmetry between public reason and public welfare. And this is why their false equivalences are false.

As Robert Audi observes, it “seems reasonable for a liberal democracy to build into its structure as much in the way of substantive promotion of the good as is implied in the essential premises underlying the liberal political theory by which it lives.”³⁹ And what conservatives dismiss as liberal sectarianism is on close inspection nothing more than this. The liberal virtues are no mere “ideals of fittingness” akin to organ teleologies, but the desiderata of democratic life, dispositions without which one will be unable to

³⁸ Elshtain, *The Bright Line*, pg. 150.

³⁹ Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pg. 63.

distinguish between discriminatory morality and anthropological morality, between public welfare and public morality, and between respect for autonomy and the thicker, more robust ideals which this respect facilitates. To the extent liberals become indignant at those who flout the liberal virtues, this is *in the name of these distinctions*, and not as a novel outlet for a righteous indignation that must be somehow conserved. If conservatives imagine that the conservation of righteous indignation is at play—akin to the mindless rechanneling of matter or energy—this is only because they disingenuously refuse to acknowledge the way in which liberal morality is just an extension of moral common sense.

Jeremy Feinberg observes that conservatives will sometimes object to deep changes in their moral environment by pleading, not the intrinsic immorality of these changes, but the unfairness of subjecting people to a new moral climate to which they have never consented and for which they are unprepared.⁴⁰ But what conservatives characterize as the unfairness of unwanted changes to their moral environments bespeaks a willingness to reduce others from autonomous centers of activity to mere components of those environments. And there is, Feinberg observes, “a more-than-liberal consensus that the personal interests are more important, more worth protecting in general than the external ones.”⁴¹ We can all recognize, for example, that a son’s personal interest in living his own life in one way trumps his father’s interest in his living his life in another way.⁴² Whether they are demanding legal prohibitions or merely issuing cultural criticisms, many conservatives imply a disregard for this “more-than-liberal consensus” whenever its entailments conflict too strongly with their visceral sentiments. But this disregard cannot be maintained consistently, because conservatives too can recognize the preeminence of personal interests over external interests in a great many contexts. The difference between liberals and conservatives, then, is not that conservatives baldly reject the philosophical premises of liberal morality but that they invoke these premises selectively when it is advantageous while dismissing them as liberal prejudice when they do not.

Delchin complains that “liberal neutrality’s ‘neutrality’ is belied by the fact that it privileges a particular conception of rationality which is itself unverifiable.” Liberal neutrality therefore stands on no firmer an epistemological footing than religious faith.⁴³ And drawing on Leo Strauss, Gawley argues that liberal theorists “suffer from the same virus that they seek to eradicate—their theories require an absolutism that is irrational.” These theorists “tell individuals to rely only on ‘facts’ (observable data) as

⁴⁰ Joel Feinberg, *Harmless Wrongdoing* (Oxford University Press 1990), pg. 48-50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pg. 60.

⁴³ Steven A. Delchin, *Scalia 18:22: Thou Shall Lie with the Academic and Law School Elite: It is an Abomination – Romer v. Evans and America’s Culture War*, 47 Case W. Res. 207, 243 (1997), pg. 246.

opposed to values, yet they do not offer ‘facts’ as to why one should.” For “what animates their theory on ‘facts’ is personal values.”⁴⁴ This Humean argument seems irrefutable. For liberals have been no more successful than anyone else in explaining how an “ought” can be derived from an “is,” and that the ultimate value of empiricism is not itself a discovery of empiricism. What Cicchino defends as the public welfare ideal’s “dialogue with reality” has not itself been derived from a dialogue with reality. And so liberal morality seems like just a philosophical castle in the air, an object of faith and nothing more.

But as liberals see it, such forays into metaphysical skepticism about the ultimate status of values do not eliminate the very real differences in the moral reasoning of liberals and conservatives. Liberals’ commitment to empiricism and rational consistency may not be “neutral” in the metaphysically absolute sense that would satisfy Gawley or Delchin. But it does at least require that people *submit* their judgments to realities—both logical and empirical—that are not of their own making, and this is what sets liberal morality apart. As we saw earlier, D’Souza contrasts the “in here” morality of liberalism to the “out there” morality of conservatives. But liberals believe this stands the truth on its head. It is “public welfare,” not “public morality,” that is the “out there” morality, because it is only public welfare that actually constrains what citizens allow themselves to do. Proponents of public morality may articulate their motivations in “out there” terms, as obedience to God’s will perhaps, or else as loyalty to tradition. But what matters is not the verbiage in which one’s moral conclusions are couched or the affects which color them—the subjective sense that they are responsive to a transcendent dispensation—but the principles which constrain their formation. And conservatives seem lacking in such principles. As we saw, Scruton may accuse liberals of having gratuitously anointed their prejudices as “Enlightened reason.” But these “prejudices” have been subjected to *tests* to which conservatives refuse to subject their own. In acting on their values only because they “know them” and “live with them,” conservatives offer no way of distinguishing these values from mere bigotry and animus other than their own say-so, which is why they are impelled to posit their false equivalencies. Macedo observes that the kind of “ultimate skepticism” according to which “confidence in public reason is really nothing more than one ultimate faith among others” may be motivated by a certain “soft intolerance.”⁴⁵ And this is because ultimate skepticism can undermine the distinctions that constrain intolerance, for this is exactly what conservative accusations about liberalism’s covert sectarianism seem designed to achieve.

In line with this ultimate skepticism, Stanley Fish argues that while liberals would contrast their own openness with the ideological closedness of religious fundamentalists, liberal openness is itself an

⁴⁴ Gawley, *Requiem for Morality*, pg. 746.

⁴⁵ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, pgs. 225-26.

ideology, because it is necessarily “closed to any line of thinking that would shut inquiry down or route it in a particular direction.” The choice, then, is not between an open environment and a closed one, but between environments that are “differently closed.”⁴⁶ But this argument that openness is necessarily closed off to closedness strikes liberals as a disingenuous gambit to derive political and moral substance from an empty tautology, a feat of self-indulgent philosophical abstraction that deprives words of their ordinary meanings. K. Anthony Appiah remarks that to insist that liberals must abstain from judgments implying an intolerance of intolerance is “to exile them from genuine human engagement.”⁴⁷ And this is because liberals’ alleged intolerance is in the end nothing beyond their disagreement with the views of conservatives. But then conservatives are simply parading tautologies as insights. To the extent that liberals are “intolerant of intolerance,” this reflects, not any gratuitous parochialism, but the requirements of any discriminatory morality, which is intrinsic to democratic life. Being rooted in this, liberal morality is no more partisan or sectarian than its *needs* to be in order to support that form of life. And this decisively distinguishes efforts to “impose liberalism” from bona fide sectarianism, like an effort to impose Protestantism at the expense of Catholicism.

Whether “moral neutrality” is the best label through which to designate those features of the liberal dispensation which distinguish it from conservatism may be open to debate. But what is certain, in the eyes of liberals, is that those features, however they be described, are being disingenuously papered over by the facile, anti-intellectual reductionism through which conservatives seek to establish their illusory symmetries and equivalencies. To be sure, some liberals may adopt a highly moralistic *tone* in defense of their “public welfare” priorities. But off-putting as this may be, the humorless abrasiveness with which liberal policies are sometimes advanced has no logical bearing on the basic soundness of liberal principles. Goldberg may bewail that environmentalism gives license to the kind of moral bullying that would be denounced as totalitarian was it perpetrated by traditionalists. But whatever the moralistic temptations of some environmentalists, these are merely personal vices which do not vitiate the basic *structural* differences between public welfare and public morality arguments. Only by fixating on matters of personal style can conservative claims of cultural oppression paper these differences over.

* * *

All these arguments seem highly compelling to liberals. But our question is whether this sophisticated liberalism constitutes something less than the ultimate in sophistication. Why do

⁴⁶ Stanley Fish, *The Trouble With Principle* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), pg. 156.

⁴⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton University Press 2005), pg. 154.

conservatives notwithstanding all these arguments, intuitive to liberals, discern a certain “thickness” in the liberal dispensation that liberals themselves do not recognize—a level of thickness that goes over and beyond whatever thickness is inherent to the distinctions between anthropological morality and discriminatory morality, or between public morality and public welfare, or between autonomy and ideals of fittingness. One explanation—the one we have just explored—is that conservatives deploy an “ultimate skepticism” about the universality of liberal ideals as a cover for their authoritarian designs, in order to discredit the principles that would impede these designs. But the other explanation—the one that follows from my broader argument in these pages—is that this ultimate skepticism is merely *the epistemological (mis)articulation of intuitions originating in the mutation counter-narrative*, and that what liberals see as authoritarian is just another facet of conservative resistance to the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity.

Liberal political morality seems to involve a certain self-discipline and self-restraint that is absent among conservatives. But understood in the context of the mutation counter-narrative, these qualities simply manifest the secularized asceticism of the buffered identity. And it is in this that the disguised thickness of liberalism ultimately consists. Thus understand, that self-restraint is not self-restraint at all, but rather a form of self-affirmation through the affirmation of a hero-system, the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. And so what may qualify as an “out there” morality from within the buffered identity will be registered as an “in here” morality when perceived from without, as just the expression of a parochial ethos, a “liberal monism” as Elshtain says. Once again, we see that conservative claims of cultural oppression are not contrived, because they are the logical outcome of how a more porous consciousness must process a more buffered one. Operating out of a more naturalistic and animalistic understanding of human agency, conservatives cannot but *conceptualize liberals’ discriminatory morality in anthropological terms*, as the expression of a hero-system and the imperatives of organismic self-maintenance. Hence Scruton’s announcement that all political beings are for certain things, not because of the arguments, but because they “know them” and “live with them.” If conservatives do not accept the discriminatory morality at face value, as the overcoming of conservative parochialism, this is because they understand this morality, not only as a theoretical system, but as the playing out of a particular identity for which liberal morality is a rationalizing principle.

Being moderns who operate *within* the framework of the buffered distance, liberals see liberalism as just a non-sectarian commitment to universal principles. But as relative pre-moderns operating from outside that framework, conservatives sense that these principles are “underwritten” by an identitarian subtext that liberals will not acknowledge. Scruton describes this intuited subtext:

Now, however, we find ourselves confronted with that monstrous entity, the modern man, the person for whom all connection with an order other than himself has to be won through an effort of his own, and who looks for that order not necessarily in what is or has been, but more often in what will be or might be. His restless longing to be rid of the here and now is stilled by no religious faith, and by no patient belief in the necessary imperfection of mortal things. His transcendental urge translates itself into an all-consuming nostalgia, nostalgia not for the past, but for a future which – like heaven – can only be negatively described.⁴⁸

Traditional hero-systems are predicated the instantiation of some broader cosmic order. But with the buffered distance having overthrown all traditional teleologies, its heroism must be defined *through distance rather than instantiation*, through a contrast between those who are aware and those who are not, between who have realized the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity and those who remain mired in their unreflective folkways. Inasmuch as those folkways disappear in the wake of liberalism's triumphs, the concrete content of the buffered distance must be suitably reconfigured so that a new set of practices and attitudes may become identified with the unreflective mores of a benighted past. Hence the indeterminacy discerned by Scruton. Like all hero-systems, the buffered distance is something that must always be *maintained*. And this means that the further liberalism realizes itself in action, the greater will be its need to detect ever more rarefied forms of oppression, injustice, and social blindness, whose relationship to our ordinary understanding of these terms must become ever more attenuated. Bork remarks that liberalism is not a "stable agenda" but "a movement away from, an impulse that must continually reinvent itself."⁴⁹ And this impulse is just the corollary of a hero-system disingenuously predicated on the transcendence of all hero-systems, which must always discover ever new ways to dramatize this transcendence—the reason why the anointed exhibit "a pattern seeking differentiation at nearly any price."

This dramatization is what transpires *underneath* liberal morality and is the reason why conservatives refuse to accept that morality at face value, in the terms I delineated earlier. "Public health" seems like a legitimate state interest, a form of "public welfare" as Cicchino would say. But Goldberg observes that Hillary Clinton's *It Takes a Village* extends this concept to nearly everything. Divorce is now a public health issue because "it creates stress in children." The basics of parenting are now public health issues because "how infants are held, touched, fed, spoken to, and gazed at" determines whether our brains will be "hijacked" by our emotions, potentially making us murderously violent."⁵⁰ And in warning of an "obesity epidemic," today's progressives have changed "the meaning of an epidemic from a public

⁴⁸ Scruton, *Meaning of Conservatism*, pg. 111.

⁴⁹ Bork, *Slouching toward Gomorrah*, pg. 62.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 350.

health threat that puts people in danger against their will—typhoid, poisoned food, bear attacks” to the “danger of people doing things they want to do.”⁵¹ Needing to maintain the buffered distance, liberalism must endow old words with clearly delineated meanings with new, ever-more expansive connotations that are foreign to all traditional understandings. Such is the *sine qua non* of maintaining the buffered distance, and therefore the liberal identity. Concern about obesity and child-rearing pertain to public welfare rather than public morality. But public welfare is being employed in the service of this sectarian end, which requires that liberals always be discovering new heretofore undiscovered chains of causality on whose basis to further entrench the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, to discipline a lax and disordered populace into the “order of mutual benefit” and the responsibilities it imposes. Traditional morality also imposes responsibilities, of course. But with public welfare, public health, and kindred concepts being endlessly malleable, liberal morality can place no limits on state and institutional intrusiveness, or on personal moralism. And this is what renders liberal morality oppressive in ways that are concealed by liberalism’s argumentative sophistication, because the very refinement of liberal morality covers over the operation of something more personal and primitive.

Diane Ravich observes that while textbook publishers have thankfully succeeded in removing the blatant sexism and racism that were once the norm in most textbooks, the concept of bias has in the process “become detached from its original meaning and has been redefined into assumptions that defy common sense,”⁵² leading to some patently absurd, almost surreal determinations about appropriate textbook content:

One of the stranger recommendation of the bias and sensitivity panel involved a true story about a heroic young blind man who hiked to the top of Mount McKinley, the highest peak in North America. The story describes the dangers of hiking up an icy mountain trail, especially for a blind person. The panel voted 12-11 to eliminate this inspiring story. First, the majority maintained that the story contained “regional bias,” because it was about hiking and mountain climbing, which favors students who live in regions where those activities are common. Second, they rejected the passage because it suggested that people who are blind are somehow at a disadvantage compared to people who have normal sight, that they are “worse off” and have a more difficult time facing dangers than those who are not blind.⁵³

A story intended to celebrate the blind for their resilience in the face of adversity is thus perversely interpreted as prejudice against them. And Ravich believes that this illustrates how once thoughtful adults have become “priggish, humorless, and censorious,”⁵⁴ bent on “eagerly sniffing the text for any signs of

⁵¹ Ibid., pg. 388.

⁵² Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), pg. 8.

⁵³ Ibid., pg. 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 19.

deviance from their tightly prescribed language code.”⁵⁵ However, the humorless censoriousness she discerns is merely a symptom of the buffered distance and its imperative to establish ever new forms of lucidity to stand in opposition to ever new forms of parochialism. With sexism and racism no longer available to fill that slot, “regional bias” has come to take their place. Liberalism is not just a moral commitment to oppose irrational prejudice, but an identity that must sustain itself and to this end will *discover* irrational prejudice in order to renew the basis of its own self-affirmation, in order to dramatize the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. Though the simple-minded might assume that this saga of a blind man’s heroism is unambiguously laudatory, the bias and sensitivity committee had to establish itself as more aware than others that the wrong lessons might be drawn from it, more aware than others of our inexorable propensity for prejudice and bias. If censoriousness cannot be eliminated, but only replaced by meta-censoriousness, this is not because of some quasi-physical force that is always conserved, but because the buffered distance is merely the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of the transcendence of all hero-systems. As such, it is parasitically reliant on other hero-systems in relation to which that transcendence can be dramatized. The bias and sensitivity panel was “eagerly sniffing” texts, not for signs of deviance, but for *opportunities* to do just this, to display the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity in defiance of others’ lax and disorganized folkways—the untutored common sense that the story was appropriate. Meta-censoriousness *presupposes* censoriousness, which it must always discover anew if it is to flourish.

This liberal meta-censoriousness is usually “well concealed beneath an outward calm” as Carl Becker would say. But it is occasionally brought to the surface and betrayed to the wider world. Laurence Tribe’s argument that there exists a “constitutional commitment to openness of mind” is illustrative:

[T]he attempt to single out some images for complete suppression...seems ultimately incompatible with the first amendment premise that awareness can never be deemed harmful in itself....[S]uppression of the obscene persists because it tells us something about ourselves that some of us, at least, would prefer not to know. It threatens to explode our uneasy accommodation between sexual impulse and social custom—to destroy the carefully-spun social web holding sexuality in its place...[T]he desire to preserve that web by shutting out the thoughts and impressions that challenge it cannot be squared with a constitutional commitment to openness of mind.⁵⁶

As we observed with Smith, liberals respond with “dismissive indignation” to the claim that psychic harms are “real” harms. But the function which Tribe’s assigns to free speech here is premised on just this assumption. Even as he endorses the “first amendment premise” that awareness can never be harmful

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 57.

⁵⁶ L. Tribe, American Constitutional Law iii (2d ed. 1988)

in itself, Tribe describes obscenity's potential psychological costs in a way that suggests otherwise. The argument is not that offense to sensibility is the inescapable price of free expression—its usual defense—but, on the contrary, that the offense is *one of this freedom's rationales*. For it is offense that serves to unravel that “carefully-spun social web” that holds sexuality and therefore identities in place. The essence of this freedom, then, resides in exposure and vulnerability to a certain kind of *violation*—which is precisely what conservatives understand liberalism to be promoting, one more manifestation of the sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized hero-system of the liberal elites. Free speech is not just a shield against meddlesome moralists but also a sword through which to instill a positive conception of virtue—the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity and its perennial hostility to the unreflective mores of a benighted past, which are being pushed through what presents itself as a culturally neutral commitment to freedom or autonomy.

The imperatives of the buffered distance are why Himmelfarb can observe that the “dominant elites” are forever seeking to “push the envelope.” Not satisfied just to promote a general moral libertarianism to which the general public has by now surrendered, the elites must moreover shock and offend by, say, producing plays depicting a homosexual Jesus Christ having sexual relations with his apostles, or by becoming “the Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature who flaunts her relations (heterosexual and homosexual) with her students as a high form of scholarship and pedagogy.”⁵⁷ The Left must perennially “push the envelope” because its hostility to the cultural status quo is not the corollary of some moral vision of which that status quo falls short, but the very content of that vision, whose core is the differential rectitude and enlightenment of the anointed and the benighted. This is what this professor's “high form of scholarship and pedagogy” is intended to dramatize. She is not merely bearing witness to the dictates of her conscience, but engaging in the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of that bearing witness, employing that conscience as the pretext through which to assail the “the carefully-spun social web” of traditionalists. Where liberals see the ecumenical meta-value of autonomy, conservatives see an ideological ruse the function of which is to socially position conservatives as benighted. This is why conservatives see symmetry where liberals see asymmetry. In the same sense that conservatives must be perennially on the lookout against contagions threatening the moral order, so liberals must be constantly alert to the myriad forms of blindness threatening the disengaged lucidity of the buffered identity. And just as conservatives will stigmatize those who are seen to embody the contagion, so liberals must stigmatize, or at least reprimand and correct, those who are

⁵⁷ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures: A Searching Examination of American Society in the Aftermath of Our Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), pg. 126-27.

perceived to embody this blindness. This is what liberalism's avant-garde commitments are designed to do and what liberal morality is designed to justify.

This goal is never officially announced, of course, and is rather advanced under the cover of plausible deniability. But it is implicit in the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, which conservatives understand viscerally. Liberals, and really anyone, can easily discern an atmosphere of traditional—"first level"—moralistic censoriousness in any movie set in the Victorian period, even when none of the characters are explicitly moralizing. For the viewer senses that the disposition to moralize is all the same being communicated continuously in subtle glances and intonations—that is, through what Bourdieu calls the "imperceptible queues of bodily *hexis*." And conservatives, with their naturalistic appreciation of liberalism, sense the very same thing in the New Victorianism, discerning meta-censoriousness in the subtle shades of social meaning being broadcast all about them on a daily basis. Conservatives are oppressed, not by an orthodoxy that is promoted as orthodoxy, but by what Bourdieu calls *doxa*. Whereas orthodoxy and heterodoxy both imply recognition of the possibility of alternative beliefs, the field of *doxa* refers to the pre-reflective plane of the taken-for-granted, where "what is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying*."⁵⁸ And what goes without saying because it comes without saying is the buffered identity, the secularized asceticism of which the ostensible issues are the symbolic embodiments. What Wilson calls endlessly recycled anecdotes of the leftist thought police in action are compelling to conservatives, not because they are an ever-present feature of ordinary life, but because they articulate this liberal *doxa*, which is always ready to impugn the lucidity and awareness of the ordinary American.

This assault can be either absorbed or resisted, but never simply ignored. Since anyone may in principle be blind to his biases, there can be no predicting what equality and sensitivity may come to require of us—and so predicting who is next on the target list. And this in and of itself is a form of cultural oppression, irrespective of whether the attack actually comes. The "Washington, D.C. bureaucrat who was fired for using the word 'niggardly' correctly in a sentence," writes Goldberg, illustrates how the "ground must constantly [be] shifted to maintain a climate of grievance," how "the grievance politics of the American left keeps decent people in a constant state of fright," afraid to "say the wrong word, utter the wrong thought, offend the wrong constituency."⁵⁹ Given that liberalism must perpetuate itself as a hero-system, conservatives must be left forever apprehensive that they will one day find themselves on the "wrong end" of the buffered distance, conscripted into the liberal hero-system as the relic of a

⁵⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge 1977), pg. 164-67.

⁵⁹ Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, pg. 282.

benighted past, as people who need to be reformed, made “aware” of what a truly discriminatory morality requires of them. Rawls designates a willingness to meet others halfway as among the liberal virtues. But conservatives believe that liberalism can never be met halfway, because liberalism will always take a step backward for every step they make forward, in order to maintain the distance upon which its self-understanding is predicated. Hence Himmelfarb’s sense that in having “progressed far beyond their original intentions,” movements of cultural and sexual liberation having generated a momentum that obscures their initial principles. The result is that in “an unhistorical age such as ours, even the immediate past seems so remote as to be antediluvian,” so that “anything short of the present state of ‘liberation’ is regarded as illiberal.”⁶⁰ This is why liberalism can never be appeased through any batch of policy prescriptions, because the liberal advocacy of these prescriptions is epiphenomenal upon a more basic impulse, liberalism’s parasitic need to define itself *in opposition* to a benighted, antediluvian past whose content can always be redefined.

Liberals understand themselves to be “simply pragmatists, fact finders, and empiricists who are clearheaded as to ‘what works,’” as Goldberg says, and not as agitators preoccupied with “pushing the envelope” or “shifting the ground” of grievances. But conscious intent and self-conception become comparatively unimportant within the New Enlightenment. For as we know from Nietzsche, it is only the smallest part of our thinking that takes the form of words. And conservatives will not restrict their attention to mere words. Conservative claims of cultural oppression track, not the conscious or even subconscious intent of liberals, but the basic shapes of social meaning inherent in a hero-system, the self-perpetuating organismic imperatives that are being expressed in these meanings. These imperatives may be significantly hemmed in—or neurally inhibited, as Lakoff says—by other forces, which is why Goldberg can concede that America’s distinctive cultural heritage has rendered liberal fascism has “milder, more friendly, more ‘maternal’” than its more notorious European counterparts. But the basic imperatives remain there all the same, waiting to become operational should they for whatever reasons become neurally *disinhibited*. Conservatives, after all, are *culturally* oppressed. They are oppressed, *not* primarily by the particular actions of liberals as individual agents, but by the structural possibilities of which those actions are intimations and by the cumulative demoralization which these intimations must engender.

This is the source of conservatives’ “ultimate skepticism” about liberal values. Where liberals see a morality of disciplined self-restraint, conservatives see the increasingly aggressive and self-confident unfolding of the buffered distance. The latter is not in the least restrained by the gamut of liberal

⁶⁰ DS 249

concepts—public health, autonomy, equal respect, and so forth. On the contrary, it is facilitated by them, facilitated by liberal sophistication. If conservatives accuse liberals of covert sectarianism at the same time as they will not baldly repudiate the distinctions upon which liberal morality is premised, this is because they sense that these distinctions facilitate the bait-and-switch of upholding the buffered identity and its basic impulses, which liberal morality promotes under the cover of plausible deniability, by articulating them in “innocently thin terms.” But conservatives do not accept these terms. And this is why conservatives are, as Scruton avows, “for certain things...not because they have arguments in their favour, but because they know them, live with them, and find their identity threatened (often they know not how) by the attempt to interfere with their operation.” This is the deepest, most visceral level of our selfhood, and precisely what all of liberalism’s sophisticated distinctions fail to capture.

2. An Eternal Quest for Social Boundary Crossing

We will now, as the first of our case studies, apply these general observations to the question of gay rights and what some conservatives oppose as the “normalization” of homosexuality. As we observed in Chapter 2, though some conservatives are prepared to designate the “homosexual lifestyle” as a grave threat to the moral foundations of society, many will prefer to criticize the gay rights movement on liberal rather than conservative grounds, in the language of freedom, equality, tolerance, and diversity rather than on the basis of some highly contestable conception of the moral order. They can so frame the stakes because they identify the “gay agenda,” not with the extension of equal dignity to a heretofore excluded group, but with a parochial conception of the good life—or “lifestyle”—whose prerogatives must be weighed against the rights of those whose deeply held convictions pit them against homosexuality. Gay rights being one expression of the broader cultural transformation signified by “ultra-liberalism,” the question is not whether a majority is entitled to impose its sexual tastes or moral values on a minority, but which of two cultures is to prevail in a situation that permits of only one winner. Liberal supporters of gay rights are therefore no more tolerant than are conservative opponents of gay rights. What liberals call “tolerance” is merely their “liberal monism,” their totalitarian desire to subordinate the conservative culture to the homosexual agenda.

Liberals dismiss this diagnosis as absurd, naturally. Robert Post writes that while all rights “instantiate cultural norms” and in this respect “hegemonically displace competing norms,” some rights, like First Amendment speech rights, “aim to promote norms that affirmatively embrace the value of cultural heterogeneity.” And this fundamentally distinguishes them from laws that work to suppress

cultural conflict in the interest of social solidarity.⁶¹ First Amendment rights do embody positive normative commitments, and so are “hegemonic with respect to those who disagree with them.” But they also create “antihegemonic domains so as to realize cultural values often associated with democracy, autonomy or tolerance.” Liberals place gay rights in the same category. They are hegemonic with respect to those who disagree with them, homophobic bigots. But this hegemony is as it were purely formal, merely the logical byproduct of homophobic hostility to heterogeneity. *Substantively*, gay rights are anti-hegemonic, because they promote freedom and pluralism. Warnings about the “normalization” of homosexuality or the imperiousness of the gay agenda confound these two levels of analysis, misrepresenting the formally hegemonic as substantively hegemonic. And this is what makes these warnings disingenuous: They conveniently overlook that the oppressiveness of gay rights to traditionalists is strictly a reflection of traditionalists’ desire to eliminate those rights, to oppress gays, and is not intrinsic to gay rights themselves.

The liberal perspective is at its most plausible when it comes to something like the constitutional nullification of anti-homosexual sodomy statutes, as in *Lawrence v. Texas*. That nullification may be formally hegemonic with respect to those who wish to monitor other people’s bedroom activities, because it now prevents them from doing so. But substantively, the ruling upholds democracy, autonomy, and tolerance, because it is not endorsing any particular view of what should be happening in those bedrooms. However, the question becomes more complicated in other contexts, such as *Romer v. Evans*. As we saw in earlier chapters, this decision nullified Colorado’s “Amendment 2” on equal protection grounds. Promoted in reaction to municipal ordinances prohibiting anti-gay discrimination in the liberal havens of Boulder, Aspen, and Denver, Amendment 2 would have repealed those ordinances and prohibited the enactment of similar ones in the future. While the measure was defended on traditional conservative grounds, as an expression of the citizenry’s moral disapproval of homosexuality, it was also defended on libertarian ones, as upholding associational freedom, the right of Colorado’s citizens to express their own *personal* moral disapproval of homosexuality through their employment and rental decisions. Amendment 2 was therefore defended as creating a *substantively* anti-hegemonic domain, and its defenders viewed the liberals who succeeded in overturning it as agents of hegemony working to curb the autonomous self-expression of Colorado citizens. While anti-gay opponents of *Lawrence v. Texas* are easily dismissed as meddlesome moralists, *Romer v. Evans* provided conservatives with an opportunity to cast liberals in that role, to argue that censoriousness has merely been replaced by meta-censoriousness.

⁶¹ Robert Post, *Law and Cultural Conflict*, 78 Chi.-Kent L. Rev. 485, 502 (2003).

In this section, I will 1) examine the basic structure of the disagreement dividing the *Romer* majority from those like Justice Scalia who believed Amendment 2 to be constitutional, 2) contextualize that disagreement within the mutation counter-narrative, and 3) argue that *Romer* embodies what I have designated as the meta-equal protection problem, an iniquitous cultural dispensation that provides the hero-systems of the Left with protections and immunities that are withheld from the hero-systems of the Right. Here as elsewhere, the conservative outlook derives its resonance from an under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative, which here too reveals a pragmatic contradiction between liberalism as a set of universal ideals and liberalism as a hero-system.

* * *

The Court's central justification for invalidating Amendment 2 as a violation of the Equal Protection Clause was that it imposed a broad political disability upon an entire class of persons. Amendment 2 ran afoul of the Equal Protection Clause because it "identifies persons by a single trait and then denies them protection across the board," and because "[t]he resulting disqualification of a class of persons from the right to seek specific protection from the law is unprecedented in our jurisprudence."⁶² Amendment 2 would have required gays and lesbians to seek political redress through the state's procedures for amending its constitution—that is, only through another constitutional amendment. By contrast, other groups unaffected by that law could continue to pursue their aims through ordinary political channels, perhaps at the municipal level where the anti-discrimination ordinances had originally been enacted. But "[i]t is not within our constitutional tradition to enact laws of this sort," held the Court, because "[c]entral both to the idea of the rule of law and to our own Constitution's guarantee of equal protection is the principle that government and each of its parts remain open on impartial terms to all who seek its assistance."⁶³ The central issue, then, was not the rights *conferred* by Amendment 2, the right to discriminate against gays and lesbians with legal impunity, but the rights *withheld* by it, the right of gays and lesbians to rescind the rights conferred, which the Court judged had been unfairly burdened.

Moreover, Colorado had not demonstrated the existence of any state interests which could justify this burden. The rationality of Amendment 2—which was all the state was charged with proving under rational basis review—was defended along a number of lines, including the state's legitimate interest in conserving resources, preserving its traditional morality, and safeguarding the associational freedom of its citizens. But the Court was unpersuaded. While it did not address the broader question of whether

⁶² *Romer v. Evans*, 517 U.S. 620, 633 (1996).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pg. 633.

moral disapproval can qualify as a rational state interest, it did refuse to credit this motivation in the case before it. The Court determined that Amendment 2's "sheer breadth is so discontinuous with the reasons offered for it that the amendment seems inexplicable by anything but animus toward the class it affects." With the state's purported interests having been dismissed as mere pretexts for animus, it was a foregone conclusion that Amendment 2 could bear no rational relationship to any legitimate state interests.⁶⁴

Dissenting, Justice Scalia argued that the Court's entire line of reasoning was contrived and without legal precedent:

The central thesis of the Court's reasoning is that any group is denied equal protection when, to obtain advantage (or, presumably, to avoid disadvantage), it must have recourse to a more general and hence more difficult level of political decisionmaking than others. The world has never heard of such a principle, which is why the Court's opinion is so long on emotive utterance and so short on relevant legal citation. And it seems to me most unlikely that any multilevel democracy can function under such a principle.⁶⁵

The Court's holding, argued Scalia, was incompatible with what we all recognize to be a state's power to pass laws prohibiting the award of municipal contracts to the relatives of city officials.⁶⁶ And it is refuted "every time a state law prohibiting or disfavoring certain conduct is passed, because such a law prevents the adversely affected group -- whether drug addicts, or smokers, or gun owners, or motorcyclists -- from changing the policy thus established in 'each of [the] parts of the State.'"⁶⁷ In other words, gays and lesbians would be in no worse shape under Amendment 2 than would be smokers who discovered that they had to travel to their state capital rather than to city hall in order to loosen any newly-imposed statewide restrictions on cigarettes or smoking. Any kind of constitutional right places special barriers before those who oppose that right, and there was nothing special about this case. Given his judgment that Amendment 2 was unremarkable as a law, Justice Scalia concluded that the Court's imputation of "animus" was without legal or empirical foundation. The Court's conclusion that Amendment 2 was inspired by "a bare...desire to harm a politically unpopular group" was "nothing short of insulting,"⁶⁸ just an expression of the "law-school view of what 'prejudices' must be stamped out." The Court had simply taken sides in the culture wars, taking upon itself the responsibility of extirpating cultural values that did not resonate with the lawyer class from which its own members are drawn. The charge of animus was just the cultural imperialism of the "Templars," or liberal elites, who will indulge their own "prejudices" in

⁶⁴ Ibid., pg. 632.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pg. 639 (Scalia, J., dissenting).

⁶⁶ Ibid., pg. 639 (Scalia, J., dissenting).

⁶⁷ Ibid., pg. 647 (Scalia, J., dissenting).

⁶⁸ Ibid., pg. 652.

their own hiring decisions but then deny this right to the “villeins,” or ordinary Americans, whose tastes and values do not enjoy the same legitimacy.

The crux of the issue seems to be as follows: We do not normally think of laws that regulate smoking or gun ownership, let alone the receipt of municipal contracts, as implicating what the Court describes as a “single trait” of “persons” or a “class of individuals.” The target of such regulations appear to be activities or discrete benefits, rather than persons as such. Relatives of city officials who seek out municipal contracts are, logically speaking, a “class of individuals,” but they do not view themselves, and are not viewed by others, as a class in the same way that gays and lesbians do and are. But then the objection to *Romer* is not that the broad principles announced by the Court are inherently unworkable, but that these principles underdetermined the Court’s conclusions. The additional premise was that the desires to smoke, own a firearm, ride a motorcycle, or be the recipient of a municipal contract are just ordinary dispositions whose frustration we may resent, but which do not go to the core of personhood and therefore define a social group, as sexual orientation does. This is why they do not implicate constitutional interests of the same order. If the Court inserted a particular cultural outlook into the legal mix, it was at precisely this point, because it is precisely this distinction that can forestall Justice Scalia’s *ad absurdum* reasoning.

But conservatives see nothing compelling in this outlook. Why not instead view laws that implicate smoking, gun ownership, and motorcycle riding as targeting particular classes of individuals and single traits of persons and view laws that implicate homosexuality as targeting behaviors and only derivatively those who undertake them? There are, after all, plenty of gun owners who see gun ownership as integral to their identities, a source of human dignity no less important than the right to have an abortion or marry a member of the same sex. If the Court would not adopt this perspective, this is because those kinds of identities are not compatible with the buffered distance. For it was the buffered distance that allowed the Court to treat indeterminate broad principles as determinate. It was this that established the lines which the Court drew between what goes to the core of our personhood and what is just an ordinary disposition, and so explains the distinctions that are implicit in its argument. If the Court’s reasoning would not be applied to any statewide regulations of firearms, this is because firearms are relics of our “barbarian past,” the province of “other, less fortunate peoples,” symbols of the violence which the disciplinary society seeks to extirpate.

It was only because the sentiments animating the passage of Amendment 2 ran so directly afoul of the buffered distance as now understood that it was interpreted as the institutionalization of gratuitous political discrimination rather than as a safeguard for individual liberty against the tyranny of local

majorities, as it was defended by Colorado. If the Court could not accept the stated objectives of Amendment 2—the preservation of Colorado’s traditional sexual mores—on their own terms, and rather reduced them to animus, this was because those traditional mores are but the “consolations of an enchanted world.” By contrast, open acceptance of one’s sexual orientation is “a stance which requires courage, the refusal of the easy comforts of authority.” This is the hidden parochialism that Justice Scalia identifies with the “Templars” and their “law-school view of what ‘prejudices’ must be stamped out,” the liberal elites’ power to uphold certain identities while discrediting others, to define personhood and distinguish it from pathology.

* * *

The logic of the buffered distance is articulated by Laurence Tribe’s analysis of *Lawrence v. Texas*, which he argues illuminates the general trajectory of the Fourteenth Amendment and other spheres of constitutional law. Tribe notes that *Lawrence* invalidated a Texas law criminalizing homosexual sodomy on Due Process grounds when it could also have done so on Equal Protection grounds—as the statute criminalized only homosexual sodomy. But while the latter would have announced a formal equality between heterosexuals and homosexuals, it would have done much less, Tribe argues, to undermine the broader social stigmas that keep gays in a subordinate social status. Given that sodomy is associated with homosexuality in our social imaginations, a law that criminalizes homosexual and heterosexual sodomy in equal measure would nevertheless be discriminatory inasmuch as it helped perpetuate the stigmas which anti-sodomy laws have historically attached to gays.⁶⁹

And this, Tribe believes, takes us to the heart of *Lawrence*’s logic. *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which *Lawrence* overturned, framed the question before it as concerning the existence of a constitutional right to engage in homosexual sodomy, and then concluded that no such right existed. But *Lawrence* did not simply reverse this conclusion and instead reformulated the very question.⁷⁰ The problem was not that the state was seeking to regulate certain anatomical behaviors that were simply none of its business, but that it was seeking to “dictat[e] the kinds of consensual relationships adults may enter” and to “channel[] all such relationships, to the degree they become inwardly physically intimate or outwardly expressive, into some gender-specified or anatomically correct form.”⁷¹ The underlying issue was not whether a particular range of physical acts were immune from government regulation, but the social dignity of the

⁶⁹ Laurence Tribe, *Lawrence v. Texas: The “Fundamental Right” That Dare Not Speak Its Name*, 117 Harv. L. Rev. 1893, 1905 (2004).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 1898-99.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 1940.

relationships expressed by those acts and therefore the social dignity of the individuals who are involved in those relationships. The “liberty” invoked by the *Lawrence* Court was therefore as much about equal dignity as it was about freedom of action.⁷² For freedom of action was being upheld in the name of this broader ideal. While the Court ostensibly opted for due process over equal protection, the meaning of the one was in fact being guided by the other. Indeed, *Lawrence* reveals that due process and equal protection cannot be sharply distinguished, because the theory of substantive liberty upon which the decision rested was “equality-based and relationally-situated.”⁷³ The decision “was protecting the equal liberty and dignity not of atomistic individuals torn from their social contexts, but of people as they relate to, and interact with, one another.”⁷⁴ Liberty and equality are intertwined because the liberty to engage in autonomous relationships is necessarily undermined by state-countenanced inequality, which attacks the individual dignity that these relationships require.

Tribe believes argues that *Lawrence* confirms that the Supreme Court’s substantive due process jurisprudence is not a history of the progressive enumeration of particular spheres of activity immune from government regulation but rather the progressive articulation of a broader principle of individual autonomy addressing itself to the right of individuals to freely engage in “value-forming and value-transmitting relationships.”⁷⁵ The case should not be interpreted as standing for any general prohibition against the translation of moral judgments into law, as some have argued, because the Court was in fact taking a moral stand in defense of a specific conception of social freedom and social dignity.⁷⁶ This conception, Tribe argues, emanates from out of a broader constitutional narrative, already implicit elsewhere, “in which due process and equal protection, far from having separate missions and entailing different inquiries, are profoundly interlocked in a legal double helix.” They represent “a single, unfolding tale of equal liberty and increasingly universal dignity” that “centers on a quest for genuine self-government of groups small and large, from the most intimate to the most impersonal.”⁷⁷ This tale embodies an “eternal quest” for social “boundary-crossing,” for “exchanging emotions, values, and ideas both expressible in words and wordless in the search for something larger than, and different from, the merely additive, utility-aggregating collection of separate selves.” The Constitution seeks, not merely to insulate discrete activities from particular forms of interference, but to sustain the social contexts in which

⁷² Ibid., pg. 1940.

⁷³ Ibid., pg. 1898.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pg. 1898.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pg. 1937.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pg. 1935-36.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pg. 1935-36.

these activities can achieve their ends, in which these activities can be realized, not merely as physical acts, but as sources of freely undertaken value-forming and value-transmitting relationships.

However, a ruling like *Romer* poses a challenge to these principles. Tribe would defend a conception of “equal liberty and dignity” that addresses itself, not to “atomistic individuals torn from their social contexts,” but to people “as they relate to, and interact with, one another.” But this tearing away from social context was exactly what was happening when the *Romer* Court concluded that Coloradans’ associational freedom was insufficiently weighty an interest to justify Amendment 2. Tribe believes that the Constitution prohibits “ced[ing] to the state the power to determine what counts as meaningful relationships and to decide when and how individuals might enter into such relationships.”⁷⁸ But was the *Romer* Court’s easy dismissal of Colorado’s interest in its citizens’ associational freedom not just such a determination? Is the workplace not, just like the bedroom, a potential source of value-forming and value-transmitting relationships? As Scalia observed, employment decisions involve all manner of judgments that do not directly pertain to the narrowly technical aspects of job performance. And this is because employers seek to maintain an atmosphere that will sustain certain kinds of value-forming and value-transmitting relationships, in which individuals contribute to rather than detract from the subtle nuances of social meaning atop of which these relationships proceed. The sense that others are crucially like us may provide an intangible source of value even if the relevant commonalities seem silly or unimportant to the outsider, as they generally will. If maintaining such relationships must, in the case of homosexuals, involve the exclusion of heterosexuals, then why may maintaining them in some workplaces not sometimes involve excluding homosexuals?

It might be objected that value-forming and value-transmitting relationships in the workplace are not matters of personal intimacy like those at issue in *Lawrence*. But the scope of Tribe’s “single, unfolding tale of equal liberty and increasingly universal dignity” extends well beyond personal intimacy. Indeed, Tribe praises the *Lawrence* Court for disregarding “the seemingly casual character of the encounter” which was the target of the vacated prosecution, and so for extending the Constitution’s protections “to some brief interactions that might not ripen into meaningful connections over time - even to some that might be chosen precisely for their fleeting and superficial character and their lack of emotional involvement.”⁷⁹ But how then can workplace relationships be dismissed as unimportant, however fleeting and superficial they may be? Why precisely is someone’s desire to share a workplace only with those who share his traditional values of such a lower order than the desire of gay men to have sex only with other men? Why,

⁷⁸ Ibid., pg. 1935-36.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pg. 1905.

in other words, does the constitutional philosophy endorsed by Tribe not support Colorado's defense of Amendment 2?

Tribe demands a certain kind of state neutrality toward the character of our value-forming and value-transmitting relationships. But taken to its logical conclusion, that neutrality has implications that most liberals cannot accept. And this is why liberals do not take their neutrality to its logical conclusion and rather circumscribe it in accordance with a hero-system, the buffered distance. The conservatives who feel most comfortable, and derive the most meaning from, being surrounded by people who share their traditional values are people who have not internalized the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity. And so their freedom does not count as genuine. They are not the "progressive beings" for whom Mill believes liberal principles are intended. If the associational freedom of Coloradans was insufficiently weighty an interest to satisfy rational basis review, and indeed was so weightless as to give rise to an inference of animus, this is because that freedom was not rooted in what Tribe celebrates "eternal quest" for social "boundary-crossing," for "exchanging emotions, values, and ideas both expressible in words and wordless." And what is this quest but a politicized and constitutionalized iteration of the peculiarly courtly rationality, the "knowledge of the whole terrain, human and non-human, in which one acts" which it demands of its participants? If these conservatives believe they can just walk through life without coming to terms with the diversity that is America, is this not because they reject the "lengthening of the chains of social action and interdependence" through which the civilizing process proceeds? In refusing this lengthening, they are also refusing what Lasch calls the "cosmopolitanism of educated experts," and so their value-forming and value-transmitting relationships simply do not count. As Tribe implicitly recognizes, what liberals celebrate as a purely abstract freedom from state interference is in fact rooted in a concrete ethos, a specific conception of virtue that circumscribes what kinds of freedom are genuine. This ethos may conduce to libertarian-sounding prescriptions in some cases, but certainly not in all, and *Romer* was an example of where it did not.

Mozilla Corporation's CEO, Brendan Eich drew a firestorm of protest after it became known that he had contributed financially to the campaign for California's anti-same-sex marriage Proposition 8. Commenting on his forced resignation, Mozilla explained:

Mozilla believes both in equality and freedom of speech. Equality is necessary for meaningful speech. And you need free speech to fight for equality. Figuring out how to stand for both at the same time can be hard. Our organizational culture reflects diversity and inclusiveness. We welcome contributions from everyone regardless of age, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender-identity, language, race, sexual orientation, geographical location and religious views. Mozilla supports equality for all. We have employees with a wide diversity of views. Our culture of

openness extends to encouraging staff and community to share their beliefs and opinions in public. This is meant to distinguish Mozilla from most organizations and hold us to a higher standard.⁸⁰

Mozilla declares that free speech and equality can involve some difficult trade-offs. But it simultaneously suggests that no trade-off was required at all. Since “equality is necessary for meaningful speech,” and since the purpose of free speech is “to fight for equality,” speech that opposes equality, like support for Proposition 8, is not really meaningful or purposive, not really speech at all, but something more primitive, something akin to a mere grunt. And so suppressing such “speech” does not come at the expense of freedom, because only those embracing equality are truly free. Like Tribe’s, Mozilla’s conception of liberty is “equality-based and relationally situated.” In defending its “culture of openness,” Mozilla was defending, not any abstract, culturally-neutral “open-mindedness,” but the kind of openness dictated by the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity, the “rational autonomy” of the liberal elites, who have been privileged to define openness for us. This is the “higher standard” to which Mozilla was holding itself and the reason why Eich’s ejection was fully compatible with its values. It is also what makes *Romer* compatible with Tribe’s conception of liberty. The freedom offered by Tribe is not the freedom to be left alone but the freedom to be a liberal, the freedom to pursue a preferred basket of liberal values—as Mozilla was doing.

* * *

Barbara Flagg observes that while the distinction between moral disapproval and animus appears to lie at the heart of *Romer*, it was unclear how the Court determined that Amendment 2 was motivated by the latter rather than the former.⁸¹ The Court appeared to be defending its determination as a reasonable inference from Amendment 2’s overbreadth: Given that its scope was wholly discontinuous with its purported aims, only animus could explain what could not be otherwise explained. This assessment of Amendment 2’s “breadth” is quite peculiar, however, and indeed seems itself wholly “discontinuous” with what the law actually did. “Overbroad” might be an accurate characterization of a law that categorically barred all gays and lesbians from serving as school teachers. But Amendment 2 sought no such thing, and would have functioned only to reestablish a state of affairs in which *individuals* could act on that traditional morality.

⁸⁰ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/388896/gay-marriage-support-falling-maggie-gallagher>

⁸¹ Barbara J. Flagg, “Animus” and Moral Disapproval: A Comment on *Romer v. Evans*, 82 Minn. L. Rev. 833, 845 (1997-1998).

It is therefore far from obvious how Amendment 2's breadth could have been judged discontinuous with the state's interests in safeguarding its citizens' associational freedom. For the actual *effect* of Amendment 2 would be the *direct reflection* of that very associational freedom. While Colorado invoked its interest in promoting traditional morality as among the law's justifications, it was in fact seeking to enforce, not that morality itself, but rather *its citizens'* right to enforce it in a context where associational freedom is generally recognized. Amendment 2 might have been discontinuous with the state's asserted interest in associational freedom had this freedom indeed constituted a mere pretext for animus. But that is precisely where the Court begged the question, because it invoked that presumed discontinuity as the *basis* for inferring the animus whose existence it needed to establish on independent grounds. How then did the Court arrive at its proper conclusions? Did it read voters' minds?

Flagg suggests that what might be formulated as a psychological question about intent is better conceived as a normative one about the purpose of equal protection review. Drawing on Cass Sunstein, she argues that while the Due Process Clause is "assimilationist" in evaluating laws according to whether they conform to traditional social norms, the Equal Protection Clause is anti-assimilationist, serving the opposite function of upending traditional practices in the name of pluralism.⁸² If the Court did not feel obligated to justify its determination empirically, this was because that determination flowed from the very nature of equal protection analysis: "State action undertaken for moral reasons alone is the antithesis of pluralism; it evinces no respect for the moral understanding or norms of those whom it situates as outsiders." The Court did not need to make an empirical finding of animus because moral disapproval is tantamount to animus as a matter of law.⁸³

But pluralism standing alone could not have yielded the Court's conclusion. For as we have seen, Amendment 2 was in fact defended as promoting a certain kind of pluralism, the associational freedom of workplaces to determine their own moral environments. Hence conservatives' sense that the *Romer* decision had situated *them* as the outsiders, persons whose moral understandings are simply not entitled to respect. If *Romer* stood for pluralism, this is only because liberals' pluralism has been defined by the buffered distance. The *Romer* Court inferred animus, not to uphold an abstract pluralism, but in order to discredit and suppress the "lax and disorganized folkways" that stood in the way of the civilizing process and its complex, ever-evolving chains of human interdependence and integration. It imputed animus, not because it discovered any subterranean motivations, but to discredit traditionalists as less than fully self-transparent and self-regulating, as having failed to internalize the ethos of disengaged self-control and

⁸² *Ibid.*, pg. 849-50.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pg.

self-reflexivity and rise above the “consolations of the enchanted world,” here symbolized by traditional values. Whereas the defenders of Amendment 2 understood themselves anthropocentrically, as *called upon* to resist the spread and acceptance of homosexuality in the name of society’s moral fiber, the Court interpreted them non-anthropocentrically, as having been *caused* to adopt their stated positions by unacknowledged psychic hostilities for which “traditional values” are a disingenuous veneer. What Amendment 2’s defenders understood anthropocentrically as righteous indignation elicited by a transcendent dispensation the Court reduced to mere Hobbesian “annoyance,” the reception by their organism of stimuli to which they are temperamentally averse, a reptilian reaction masquerading as something higher. Though its determination of a “bare desire to harm” homosexuals was presented as an empirical inference concerning probable inner motivations, the mutation counter-narrative reveals it to be the *a priori* rationality of the buffered distance.

But while the charge of animus served this political purpose, it was disingenuous intellectually. For the New Enlightenment tells us that particular issues can resonate with us as they do because they have become “neurally bound” with more general systems of meaning-production. And conservatives’ pleas that their hostility to gay rights expresses a system of values rather than “bare” animus originate in precisely this intuition. Conservatives may seem disingenuous in their refusal to accept plainspoken demands for equal rights at face value, which they instead trace to the some broader “liberal agenda.” But that broader agenda is acknowledged by Tribe himself when he links the cause of gay rights, not to any abstract, culturally denuded notion of negative freedom, but to a particular conception of human flourishing, the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity purged of all thick moral hierarchies.

With this conception having become the invisible, taken-for-granted background of things, its historical contingency does not figure into liberals’ understanding of conservatives, who are therefore seen as just irrationally hostile to “freedom.” But more is at stake. Robert Cover writes:

No set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate it and give it meaning. For every constitution there is an epic, for each Decalogue a scripture. Once understood in the context of the narratives that give it meaning, law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live.

In this normative world, law and narrative are inseparably related. Every prescription is insistent in its demand to be located in discourse – to be supplied with history and destiny, beginning and end, explanation and purpose.⁸⁴

The universalist virtues that we have come to identify with modern liberalism, the broad principles of our law, are essentially system-maintaining “weak” forces. They are virtues that are justified by the need to ensure the *coexistence* of worlds of strong normative meaning. The systems of normative life that they maintain are the products of “strong” forces: culture-specific designs of

⁸⁴ Robert M. Cover, *Nomos and Narrative*, 97 Harv. L. Rev. 1, 4-5 (1983-1984).

particularist meaning. These "strong" forces.... *create* the normative worlds in which law is predominantly a system of meaning rather than an imposition of force.⁸⁵

But different worlds of strong normative meanings can sometimes cease to coexist peacefully under the umbrella of modern liberalism's universalistic virtues. At this point, they must become pitted against each other in a struggle to more definitively concretize the meaning of these virtues in reflection of one culture-specific design of particularist meaning to the exclusion of its competitors. This was precisely what transpired in *Romer*, as different sides of the culture war sought to define the stakes in reflection of their particular position along the civilizing process.

Those who embodied a more "advanced" iteration of the buffered identity implicitly deployed the subtraction account as the "epic" through which their specific prescriptions would be intelligible. What, after all, is Tribe's "single, unfolding tale of equal liberty and increasingly universal dignity" but a subtraction story, the story of our progressive liberation from the confining illusions of a benighted past? If conservatives will not acknowledge this single, unfolding tale, this is because they interpreted the situation through their under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative. Liberals see a struggle between enlightenment and ignorance. But conservatives see a conflict between the ordering impulses of the elites and the unregimented folkways of the unwashed masses. For this is what allowed Justice Scalia to turn a question about the equality owed to gays notwithstanding conventional social morality into a question about the equality owed to the villeins, or ordinary Americans, notwithstanding the "law-school view of what 'prejudices' must be stamped out." Who are Justice Scalia's Templars, after all, but the historical knight-priests who, had they lived a few centuries later, would have absorbed the courtly-ascetic ethos along both sides of their dual identities? And who are his villeins but the historical commoners who would eventually become the targets of these newly reformed elites' reforming impulses? The elites understand themselves as advancing equality rather than the civilizing process, of course. But what they see as a single, unfolding tale of equal liberty and increasingly universal dignity presupposes a transformation of the "whole human make-up" toward the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity—the kind of person who is well adjusted to a workplace like Mozilla, to the milquetoast, technocratic egalitarianism that upholds the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. And this is why conservatives sense the secret machinations of a liberal agenda all about them. The *Romer* Court was adjudicating, not only rights, but even more importantly social meanings, upholding the subtraction account as the lens through which the meaning of equality is to be conceptualized.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pg. 12.

But conservatives operate with a different understanding of equality. Objecting to the outcome in *Romer*, Graglia argues that some of the Justices slavishly prostrated themselves before Tribe and other prominent professors of constitutional law:

The average American has never heard of Larry Tribe, but to Justice Kennedy, he is a reliable guide to the academically approved position on almost any public policy issue and, even more important, a fount on acceptable (to other academics) means for the Court to put into effect. The ordinary American has never heard, indeed, of any of the five professors of constitutional law who volunteered to offer, as they put it in their brief, “what assistance they can,” to the Court in reaching its proper conclusions in *Romer*. To the Justices, however—many of whom can only aspire to the professors’ level of constitutional sophistication and intellectual repute—they are as the New York Times’ drama critic is to a playwright.⁸⁶

Tribe’s level of name-recognition among average, or even above-average, Americans may not seem germane to the quality of his arguments, and therefore to the kind of attention they are owed from the Court. But the mutation counter-narrative reveals that what appears like an ad hominem attack is also a defense of inherited “folkways” against the uniformizing spirit of the buffered distance. Modern elites, we observed with Taylor, seek to “change the lives of the mass of people” to instill norms that carry “strong conviction among these elites.” And the five professors of constitutional law who offered the *Romer* Court “what assistance they can” were carrying forth this tradition. It is inherent to the civilizing process that civilizing norms spread from elite circles—where they are most at home—outward, to other social milieus where they will encounter various degrees of resistance before they are finally internalized and become second-nature. Tribe and the other law professors involved in *Romer* were engaged in precisely this centrifugal project. If the relationship between the professors and justices was analogous to the relationship between drama critic and playwright, this is because the buffered distance was the ongoing historical drama that was driving the controversy forward. This is the “culture-specific design of particularist meaning” that liberals will not acknowledge and the reason why conservatives saw *Romer* as substantively, and not just formally, hegemonic. If liberals disagree, this is because they see themselves in “innocently thin terms,” concealing the pragmatic contradiction between their egalitarianism and the heroic narrative that drives that egalitarianism onward.

Graglia can feel no theoretical contradiction in acknowledging Tribe’s “level of constitutional sophistication” while at the same time suggesting that he is an outsider who would best mind his own business because he was attuned to this contradiction. Liberalism is a hero-system that mistakes itself for the transcendence of all hero-systems. And this allows liberals to hold themselves out as conservatives’ moral and intellectual superiors and, under this pretense, shield their hero-systems from the scrutiny,

⁸⁶ Lino A. Graglia, *Romer v. Evans: The People Foiled Again by the Constitution*, 68 U. Colo. L. Rev 409, 412-413 (1997).

scorn, and interference which they mete out to the hero-systems of conservatives. *Romer* was a symbol of this tendency, a symbol of the meta-equal protection problem, liberals' privileged ability to conceal the symmetries that unite them with the conservatives they despise.

Dalrymple recounts an occasion on which he attended a "bourgeois bohemian" funeral in Paris and stood out in his dark suit and tie. This, he assumes, must have been seen as provincial and conventional when contrasted to the casual dress of the other attendees, who appeared as if they had "just popped into the cemetery after a bit of shopping in the local grocery." It would not have been difficult "to construct the bohemian argument against any kind of formality of dress at a funeral," to argue "that what counts is what people genuinely and authentically feel for and about the dear departed, not how they dress" and that "the assumption of special clothing encourages hypocrisy and pretense." But hypocrisy and pretense, insists Dalrymple, cannot be "so easily eliminated from the human repertoire." For "what started out as the rejection of convention has itself become the convention, and the adolescents who attended the funeral in their barely gentrified version of American ghetto costume will have formed the prejudice that funerals are no different, sartorially, from other gatherings, and it will not occur to them that things could be, and have been different."⁸⁷

While these Bobos might understand themselves as having embarked on Tribe's eternal quest for boundary-crossing, for "exchanging emotions, values, and ideas both expressible in words and wordless," their ethos is in truth a particular way of *structuring* that boundary crossing and exchange, an endorsement of specific social meanings to the necessary exclusion of others. The Bobos see their informality as signifying the establishment of a symbolically neutral environment which they freely navigate as disengaged strategic agents who express inner sentiments rather than acquiesce in an outer teleology. But the ostensibly casual Bobos are no less than the seemingly stuffier moral traditionalists permeated by a field of social meanings that they are not at liberty to simply disregard.

The Coloradans who wanted the right to fire homosexual employees wanted the right to regulate these social meanings in their workplaces, something that the liberal elites and their "law-school view of what 'prejudices' must be stamped out" are already privileged to do. The difference is that the latter proceed under the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, which endows their efforts to regulate social meaning with various technocratic disguises. What I described in Chapter 4 as the culturally parochial "gravitas" of scholars may superficially appear like the achievement of the disengaged self-possession to which the buffered identity aspires, and especially when compared to the unabashed

⁸⁷ Dalrymple, *In Praise of Prejudice*, pg. 40.

effusiveness of “red state”-brand patriotism found at Sarah Palin rallies. The latter is fairly characterized as “pre-modern” insofar as it rejects the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity in order to surrender to embodied feeling of the higher. And scholarly “gravitas” is undoubtedly accompanied by a kind of self-reflexivity that is absent in these settings. But one would nevertheless be mistaken—distortively naturalizing the features of the modern liberal identity—in imagining that this signifies the categorical sloughing off of the conservative patriot’s heteronomy, the achievement of a special maturity and self-control that eludes the latter in his rapturous abandonment. For even scholarly detachment remains a form of engagement insofar as it is rooted in a socially generated symbolic life-world. Those who flout its mores may not be condemned as “immoral.” But they will be dismissed as “unserious,” becoming the object of “certain nuances of contempt and disappointment.” And this serves the same function as does moral condemnation within the less intellectualized and sublimated hero-systems of conservatives.

If this goes unrecognized, this is because liberal occupations and preferences have been *culturally defined* as a special naturalistic lucidity, *culturally defined* as a commitment to social boundary crossing, *culturally defined* as the “Open Personality.” The liberal virtues being the products of cultural definition rather than any ontologically primordial disengagement, liberals must no less than conservatives place severe limits on social boundary crossing, on the kinds of emotions and values that may be exchanged in their midst, because they are no less than conservatives beholden to the imperative of a hero-system. And so they can never be as respectful of human idiosyncrasy as lofty talk of endless boundary crossing would suggest. It is the conservative who always stands accused of animus. But the liberal elites will react in the very same way to whatever threatens their hero-system.

The elites can see no equivalency between any liberal self-righteousness toward conservatives and the bigot’s antipathy for gays or other minorities. That antipathy, explains William Eskridge, expresses a “body politics,” the project of naturalizing inferiority, and has a long pedigree in discrimination against various immigrant groups, blacks, and religious minorities.⁸⁸ In advancing a “politics of disgust and contagion.” This body politics demonizes the targeted minority as subhuman, not just mischievous.⁸⁹ And this kind of denigration is categorically different from liberal hostility toward traditionalism and traditionalists:

[A]llowing a schoolteacher to be openly lesbian does not impose upon unhappy parents or even traumatized children the kind of scarlet letter that body politics imposes upon homosexuals. Even

⁸⁸ William N. Eskridge, Jr., *Body Politics: Lawrence v. Texas and the Constitution of Disgust and Contagion*, 57, Fla. L. Rev. 1011, 1020 (2005).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 1048.

the most politically correct regulations do not trumpet an image of the bigot as someone whose body is a corrupt situs of disgusting actions, whose soul is degenerate and subhuman, and whose polluted presence is contagious. In short, even if traditionalist claims can be deemed liberties, the demonization of the anti-gay bigot is in no way commensurable with the demonization of the homosexual.⁹⁰

Eskridge discerns a vast asymmetry between these two forms of demonization. But there is also symmetry underneath that asymmetry. Politically correct gay rights advocates may not see the body of the traditionalist as “a corrupt situs of disgusting actions.” But neither do they see him as merely ignorant, misguided, or even mischievous. For if the buffered identity involves an aspiration to spiritual purity, then the refusal of this purity must, as a corollary, involve a kind of spiritual corruption, a fallenness into an idolatry that degrades one’s basic humanity. If liberals do not recognize this conservaphobia—the distinctively liberal form of animus—this is because it has been invisibly built into their very identities, revealing itself only in the subtle shades of pre-reflective meaning that are easily denied or papered over. But conservatives sense these meanings very powerfully. Hofstadter reports how a defender of McCarthy remarked that “the irrationality of the college-educated mob that has descended upon Joseph R. McCarthy” could only be explained by “something in McCarthy’s personal makeup,” by “a sort of animal negative-pole magnetism which repels alumni of Harvard, Princeton and Yale.”⁹¹ And this “animal negative-pole magnetism” is precisely what conservatives will often exude to liberals. The alumni of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale had their reasons for despising McCarthy, just as contemporary liberals have their reasons for despising various contemporary conservatives. But evidence and argument do not alter the fact that the buffered identity has *as its logical corollary* a certain dehumanizing contempt for those who resist its disciplines and repressions.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Hannity observes that left-wing comedians can defend mock death threats against conservative politicians as “ironic jokes” while conservatives who do the same against liberals provoke more concern. And as we also saw, Congressman Peter King attributes the double-standard noted by Hannity to liberals’ undeserved Upper West Side privilege. But as liberals understand it, this is a privilege that has been *earned* through the civilizing process itself, which has endowed them with a more self-transparent and self-regulating form of agency. Having more thoroughly absorbed the civilizing process with its automatic inhibitions against impulsive, unpredictable violence, liberals are presumed capable of entertaining intimations of violence without the danger that these will spill over into action. They are permitted what Elias calls a “relaxation within an already established standard” as those

⁹⁰ Ibid., pg. 1049.

⁹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), pg. 13.

who have yet to fully internalize that standard are not. And this is why the latter must radiate a dim but palpable “animal negative-pole magnetism.”

The rational discourse of liberals proceeds atop of something more primordial, the affect-transforming character of the civilizing process, which lives on in the taken-for-granted structure of liberals’ visceral judgment that conservatives are primarily driven by animus of one kind or another but that they are above such brutishness. Conservaphobia is ultimately continuous with, because a sublimated and politicized iteration of, the visceral repugnance which the courtiers would have felt toward those who still ate with their hands, salivated freely, and executed bodily functions publicly. As today’s elites, liberals discern the very same primordial indiscipline in the conservative mind and personality. The demonization of the bigot may not be identical with the demonization of the homosexual. But this is because whereas the disgust of conservatives is aggravated by hatred, the disgust of liberals is tempered by contempt. This is only to be expected given that liberals are, as standard-bearers of modernity’ secularized asceticism, the heirs of what Nietzsche calls the ascetic priest, “the first form of the more *delicate* animal that despises more readily than it hates.”⁹² If conservatives detect a basic symmetry underneath the ostensible mildness of liberal meta-censoriousness, this is because they understand that mildness as yet another instance of liberal privilege, one more sublimation, intellectualization, and etherealization for which liberals deserve no moral credit.

3. An Exhilarating Feeling of Momentousness

Lawrence Lessig argues that some traditional women have opposed abortion because it has become associated with women’s right to full and equal participation in the workplace. When staying at home to raise children was thought to be a woman’s natural role, the decision to do so carried no social costs. But with the “professional model” for women having become established as legitimate, it necessarily challenges the appropriateness of choosing a traditional life. With the latter having become something that needs to be explained and defended, traditional, domestically-inclined women are confronted with a justificatory burden that was formerly non-existent. At best, the professional model creates a new onus because traditional motherhood is no longer considered unambiguously appropriate. At worst, it inflicts a new social stigma to the extent traditional motherhood becomes suspect as a surrender to patriarchy. If some women oppose abortion, this is as a “defensive construction” of social meaning. Their opposition is an attempt to preserve the unquestioned naturalness and inevitability of

⁹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pg. 126.

the traditional role of women as child-bearers against developments that would dissolve that naturalness and create unwanted psychological burdens.⁹³

Lessig's analysis of traditionalist motivations falls in line with the feminist narrative, and also the broader liberal narrative, according to which women who oppose feminism do so because feminism threatens the psychological safety provided by traditional gender roles. Though constricting and stifling, these roles were at least a known variable, a secure source of meaning which feminism's grander emancipatory ambitions threaten to replace with uncertainty and confusion. Thus, Gloria Steinem says that religious fundamentalism can appeal to women because "the promise *is* safety in return for obedience, respectability in return for self-respect and freedom—a sad bargain."⁹⁴ And Catherine MacKinnon writes that women who opposed the ERA

feared the meaning of sex equality in their lives, because sex inequality gave them what little they had, so little that they felt they couldn't afford to lose it. They hung onto their crumbs from experience, as if that was all they were ever going to get. Even more, I think they opposed ERA because they heard in it a judgment of existing possibilities that meant that they had lived their one and only life under conditions that were less than they might have been, which made *them* less than they might have been.⁹⁵

Here again, the judgment of the Left is that it is conservatives, not liberals, who are *seeking to defend a hero-system* and to this end will refuse to acknowledge inconvenient truths, like the very existence of oppressive social structures. Where the Left stands for truth, the Right stands for identity, on whose altar truth and awareness are sacrificed. To be liberal is to be psychologically liberated, open to experience and given to reflection. To be traditional is to be psychologically confined, fearful of the unknown and untried. But seeing symmetry where liberals see asymmetry, conservatives believe that feminism is driven by its own identitarian motivations, its own quest for identity, of which the denigration of traditional women as fearful and disappointed is one feature. Feminism is one more tentacle of the liberal culture, whose false universalism is always the pretext for a continuing assault on conservative identities. If feminists cannot recognize this, the reason is that to do so is also to recognize that *they* are "less than they might have been" in consequence of their very feminism, to which they have sacrificed their freedom as autonomous individuals.

On the standard feminist narrative, women's liberation represents a struggle against the forces of patriarchy, against the various legal norms, social practices, and cultural prejudices that continue to

⁹³ Lawrence Lessig, *The Regulation of Social Meaning*, 62 U. Chi. L. Rev. 943, 987-90 (1995).

⁹⁴ Qt. in Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pg. 260.

⁹⁵ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), pg. 226.

confine women to a subordinate social station. But as conservatives see it, this is merely history as written by the victors, and so a history that silences the voices of the losers, non-feminist women, whose trials and tribulations never enter the moral equations of liberals. Feminism is a struggle, not by all women against male defenders of patriarchy, but by an elite minority of influential women against a majority of women who never felt compromised by traditional gender roles. F. Carolyn Graglia argues in her *Domestic Tranquility*, a “brief against feminism,” that while feminists believe they have unearthed a neglected history of women’s resistance to traditional gender roles, the truth is that the exceptions to the rule had always been recognized and tolerated.⁹⁶ What is new is not the realization that some women are stifled by traditional expectations, but that these women should have used the vehicle of feminism to violate the traditional “women’s pact.” While this pact always assumed that most women sought domesticity, it also acknowledged that there would always exist an exceptional minority that preferred careers and independence. And so it affirmed the right of each to go their own way.⁹⁷ But not satisfied “merely to shape their own destinies,” feminists have sought to impose their own values upon all women and reshape society accordingly.⁹⁸ Feminism is therefore just another form of liberal elitism, one more arena on which the anointed can mock, scold, and intimidate the benighted under the deceptive veneer of enlightenment, progress, and liberation. Feminists charge that historians have covered over a heretofore hidden history of resistance to traditional gender roles. But they have themselves covered over a hidden history of women’s resistance to feminism, dismissing this resistance as fear and pathology in an effort to deprive anti-feminist women of their own voice.

Feminists have insisted that most of what we take to be sex differences are culturally imposed, but Graglia retorts that “contemporary feminism has undertaken its own cultural impositions.”⁹⁹ While feminists represent their agenda as a response to the real desires of most women, they have in fact gone out of their way to engineer women’s environments in ways that generate those desires. Liberalized divorce laws, explains Graglia, were an effort “to instill in women distrust of their husbands and reluctance to leave the work force for fear of financial privation in the event of their divorces that ‘reform’ made more likely.”¹⁰⁰ In leveling this threat, divorce reform “warned women to adopt the feminist perspective and replace homemaking with a full-time career.”¹⁰¹ Feminists now dismiss traditional gender roles as

⁹⁶ Ibid., pg. 181.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pg.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 263-64.

⁹⁹ F. Carolyn Graglia, *Domestic Tranquility: A Brief Against Feminism* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1998), pg. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 265.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 136.

arbitrary. But it was feminists who first engineered these perceptions by promoting a socially-enforced androgyny. The feminization of men, writes Graglia, was among “the seeds from which women’s discontent grew and which blossomed into the women’s movement.” Absent the support and encouragement of a masculine man, women could not but become disenchanted with a traditional female role, feminism’s ultimate objective.¹⁰² Their dissatisfaction with this role was not something just there waiting to be named by those who courageously spoke truth to power, but rather had to be *created* in order to socially vindicate the self-image of a minority of women who took it upon themselves to define womanhood as such and stigmatize those who would define it differently.

To this end, feminists have waged a largely victorious “war against the housewife,” employing any and all means to denigrate her character, intelligence, and social status.¹⁰³ Hence Simone de Beauvoir’s and Betty Friedan’s repeated references to the housewife as a “parasite,” which remind Graglia of Hitler’s tirades against the Jews.¹⁰⁴ While feminists have attempted to ride “piggyback” on the civil rights movement, their willingness to perpetuate false stereotypes about, and mete out undisguised contempt toward, the traditional housewife proves that feminism is nothing like the struggle for black equality.¹⁰⁵ On the contrary, women’s liberation is an Orwellian sleight of hand, because what feminists uphold as liberation could never have succeeded without the establishment of new social stigmas to denigrate dissenters and keep women within the fold of feminism. These stigmas had no counterparts in the civil rights movement, whose demands did not involve a project of social engineering by a small elite. The civil rights movement helped give freedom to those who wanted it. But far from liberating women to do what they were all along inclined to do, feminists have sought to *generate* the specific social and cultural conditions under which women will be propelled toward feminism.

Central to this effort is feminism’s celebration of casual, meaningless sex. This kind of sex, observes Graglia, is fully compatible with women’s participation in the market. By contrast, “the meaningful sex that overwhelms, that transforms” threatens to make domestic roles more appealing to women.¹⁰⁶ Feminists therefore sought to strip sexuality of any higher metaphysical meaning, reducing sexual intercourse to “the physical assuaging of a genital itch.”¹⁰⁷ While feminism represented itself as liberating women from antiquated sexual ideologies that subordinate them to patriarchy, it was in fact

¹⁰² Ibid., 39.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 96.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 119.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 368-69.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 176.

instituting a new sexual ideology the purpose of which was to subordinate women to feminism itself. And this new ideology has served reconfigure gender relations in a way that socially corroborates the feminist worldview. Women could never have been drawn into the feminist fold were they not first deracinated of their femininity, which is what feminism has always endeavored to promote. By cultivating a dissatisfaction that it would then promise to relieve, feminism turned itself into a self-fulfilling prophesy, concealing all the machinations that have gone into generating the perception of feminism as obviously enlightened and liberating.

Catherine MacKinnon believes that the patriarchy compels women to everyday “spend an incredible amount of time, life, and energy cowed, fearful, and colonized, trying to figure out how not to be next on the list.”¹⁰⁸ But Graglia believes that these apprehensions are themselves the products of feminism, the direct consequence of feminism’s drive to deracinate sexuality of its traditional moral and spiritual moorings. She writes:

Today, well-educated professional women, who are embarrassed to defend the unsophisticated concepts of virginity and chastity, are less competent to control men’s sexual advances than high school girls were in the 1940s. One result is the invention of concepts like “date rape” and an expansive law of sexual harassment in an attempt to provide the protection for women against seduction they once felt completely confident in securing for themselves with a graceful—and, we sometimes thought, even elegant—refusal.¹⁰⁹

Whereas feminism interprets date rape and sexual harassment as lingering remnants of a patriarchy that was once unresisted and unabashed, Graglia sees these as the side-effects of feminist victories, which are now being exploited to secure further such victories. For the helplessness that some women may feel before male sexual imperiousness is the natural consequence of the erosion of traditional values at the hands of feminism. In reducing sex to the “physical assuaging of a genital itch,” feminism deprived women of any basis for refusing sex beyond bare disinclination. Not being grounded in transcendent values as are chastity and virginity, that disinclination cannot but seem arbitrary, something that might be overcome through male persistence. Liberals would ground the refusal of sex in autonomous choice. But autonomous choices can change and be changed by other people. And so feminism must plunge many women into perpetual sexual confusion and ambivalence, further inviting the male persistence for which expansive definitions of rape and sexual harassment are then offered as solutions. If there is a “rape culture,” this is a social construction of feminism itself, the natural consequence of the psychic conflicts that it necessarily inculcates. Having eviscerated the social understandings that would allow women to refuse sex confidently, feminism then represents the ambivalence and confusion that ensues as the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 170.

subtle, psychologically coercive machinations of omnipresent patriarchal power, thus further galvanizing feminist consciousness and the desire for a far-off utopia in which genuine female agency will for the first time be conceivable. Only then will women finally rest assured that their ostensible desires are truly their own, and feminism holds itself out as the only path to this transformed world and state of being. But this never ending journey has in fact been necessitated by feminism itself, which has deprived many women of any other sources of human meaning. Here as elsewhere, the critical theory of the Right tells us that the dominant dispensation has succeeded in creating the conditions for its own social vindication, conditions under which it can *recast its effects as its rational justification*.

* * *

What are we to make of the anti-feminist argument? Graglia's basic premise, that women of the pre-feminist period were free to lead their lives as they chose but that feminists not content with this state of affairs have imposed their wills upon a wider population of women predisposed toward domesticity, is clearly fanciful. Obviously, career-minded women in the past faced many obstacles that men did not. Perhaps traditional gender roles were not in every case as black-and-white they are sometimes seen from today's vantage point. But they were clearly marked by the kind of cultural coercion which Graglia believes that only feminism can exercise, as well as many forms of legal coercion. Career-minded women may have been tolerated here and there under unusual circumstances, but what Graglia idealizes as the "women's pact" was surely less ecumenical than she pretends.

But putting aside all unwarranted nostalgia, the mutation counter-narrative reveals the higher truth behind Graglia's accusations—and for the same reason it does so in all conservative claims of cultural oppression, because it reveals molding and imposition where liberals see only liberation and enlightenment. The subtraction account naturalizes autonomous self-determination as an essential yearning of liberated human nature. But the mutation counter-narrative tells us that what purports to autonomous self-determination is in fact one historically constructed understanding of human agency among others. The "inner base area" of the buffered identity is not something that was lying there all along, albeit concealed underneath various collectivizing illusions, but the product of specific social forces which have conditioned the human organism into a self-reflexivity at whose behest many of our default human dispositions must be tamed and disciplined.

This must affect how one assesses feminism. The subtraction account leads us to see feminism as a response to the repression of women's individuality. But the mutation counter-narrative locates feminism as among the forces that *created the capacity for individuality*, and therefore as one more

extension of modern liberalism's disciplinary agenda. For it was feminism that *molded* women into the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, repressing the "lax and disorganized folkways" of traditional femininity, integrating them into the extended chains of social interdependency presupposed by the buffered distance and implicitly acknowledged by the career-minded woman. Feminism claims to uphold respect for women's personhood. But as John Gray notes, personhood is not the essence of humanity, but merely one of its masks. Persons "are only humans who have donned the mask that has been handed down in Europe over the past few generations, and taken it for their face."¹¹⁰ And feminism is premised on just this conflation, because it overlooks its complicity in creating that which it purports to be defending, its complicity in imposing a kind of consciousness and identity that need never have existed and therefore never needed to be liberated.

This is the core of the mutation counter-narrative and the core of Graglia's attack on feminism. She is critiquing feminism not simply as idea but on the level of cosmological orientation, as part and parcel of the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. If feminists have, as Graglia alleges, sought to eviscerate the metaphysical significance of sexuality, reducing the latter to the "physical assuaging of a genital itch," this is just another instance of the buffered identity's need to reduce "embodied feelings of the higher" to natural impulses purged of all anthropocentric predicates. The disenchantment of sexuality by feminism was, just like the disenchantment of the world generally, promoted in order to cultivate a disciplined and productive citizenry. For this is what the career woman exalted by feminism symbolizes, the milquetoast technocratic egalitarianism of the liberal culture, in whose service every last vestige of traditionalist sentiment must be uprooted. If feminism originated in the imperiousness of elite cadres bent on stigmatizing the housewife, this is just part and parcel of the civilizing process, whose norms always spread outward from elite circles through the badgering, bullying, and scolding of the unwashed masses, whose capitulation will then be paraded as liberation. Whereas liberals locate the meaning of feminism in the supersession of certain historic inequalities and the prejudices that sustained them, conservatives locate it in the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, for which feminism is a vehicle. And this is why they refuse to accept feminism at face value, why they believe that "women's equality" describes feminism in "innocently thin terms."

They sense that these terms conceal the distinct sources of feminism's appeal to its adherents, which is not well captured by abstractions like freedom and equality. Christina Hoff Sommers writes that the gender feminists' motivation is powerfully enhanced by the "faith that they are privy to revolutionary

¹¹⁰ John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007), pg. 58-59.

insights into the nature of knowledge and society.” This “inspires them with a missionary fervor unmatched by any other group in the contemporary academy.”¹¹¹ “An exhilarating feeling of *momentousness*,” she writes, “routinely surfaces at gender feminist gatherings,” as feminist theorists invoke Copernicus and Darwin to symbolize the importance of their new discoveries, basking in the “exhilaration of feeling themselves in the vanguard of a new consciousness.”¹¹² Feminists are seeking to express, not merely a set of *doctrines* of which one might or might not be persuaded, but, more basically, a *consciousness* which one might or might not achieve. They understand themselves, not merely as liberated from traditional expectations, prejudices, and stereotypes, but as privileged participants in a privileged epistemic and spiritual dispensation through which they enjoy a special lucidity that is unavailable to women who stubbornly resist feminism.

This hierarchy is feminism’s inflection by the buffered distance, which weds feminism’s social meaning, not only to the elimination of irrational prejudices about women’s abilities, but to the presumption that feminist women have achieved a more self-transparent and self-regulating form of agency than is enjoyed by non-feminists, the “less fortunate peoples” of a benighted past. Sommers relates an article in *The New Yorker* on the ultraorthodox Hasidic women of Brooklyn in which the writer expressed her astonishment that what she expected would be “self-effacing drudges” worn down by a patriarchal family system turned out to be a “remarkably energetic, mutually supportive community of women, an almost Amazonian society” with strong families and large thriving marriages. These women “sped around like intergalactic missiles” and “seemed...to be as occupied with worthy projects as Eleanor Roosevelt, as hospitable as Welcome Wagoneers.”¹¹³ If the writer expected to encounter only self-effacing drudges, this was because her implicit embrace of the subtraction account of modernity compelled her to understand traditionalist institutions as mere confinements rather than sources of meaning, to see the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, not as one source of value among others, but as the *sine qua non* of all value. Feminism defines freedom as the freedom to be a feminist, and so it must dismiss all who refuse that freedom as deficient in the basic human agency powers that only feminism can liberate.

This denigration is necessary, not gratuitous, because it is the ineluctable corollary of feminists’ self-understanding as cognitive elites who have transcended the confining horizons in which others remain imprisoned. Sommers writes:

¹¹¹ Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?*, pg. 52

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pg. 86-87.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 261.

An illiberal authoritarianism is implicit in the doctrine that women are socialized to want the things the gender feminist believes they *should not want*. For those who believe that what women want and hope for is “constrained” or “coerced” by their upbringing in the patriarchy are led to dismiss the values and aspirations of most women. The next step may not be inevitable, but it is almost irresistible: to regard women as badly brought-up children whose harmful desires and immature choices must be discounted.¹¹⁴

The notion that traditional women are “constrained” or “coerced” by an oppressive patriarchal ideology follows naturally from the subtraction account. Feminists wish to see their feminism, not as one hero-system among others, but as the transcendence of all hero-systems, and must to this end cast competing hero-systems, not as genuine alternatives, but as the unwitting and unaware byproducts of unrecognized social forces from which feminists, having transcended all hero-systems, are immune. But operating as they do out of an under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative, conservatives see feminism as a hero-system in its own right. And so they see feminist worries about the constraining or coercion of traditional women as an ideological ruse through which to reinforce the preeminence of that hero-system. Though feminists will insist that they are merely trying to rescue women from a demeaning status quo, and not demeaning women themselves, this is a rationalization through which feminists dramatize their hero-systems, conscripting traditionalists into it as relics of a benighted past, the foils and props with which liberalism cannot dispense.

Graglia may fail to acknowledge that the traditional mother and housewife of old was a “social construction,” as feminists will emphasize. But the mutation counter-narrative reveals that the liberated woman of feminism is no less of a social construction. Biology may not be destiny, but neither is the kind of individuality promoted by feminism. For the latter is the product of a culturally-sustained hero-system, not culturally unvarnished human nature. Feminists would see themselves as continuing in the tradition of Darwin and Copernicus. But Darwin and Copernicus alerted us to features of the natural world that pre-existed their discovery by the human mind. By contrast, the higher consciousness of feminists pertains only to the social reality that feminists have themselves institutionalized. If the Left in general is guilty of naturalizing the features of the modern liberal identity, then feminism in particular is guilty of naturalizing the feminist identity, as something that follows naturally from “consciousness raising.” But understood from within the mutation counter-narrative, what purports to be consciousness raising is in fact consciousness *creating*, a “censorship of fashion” functioning to inculcate the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, a “silent curriculum” that culturally credentials feminist dispositions as autonomous and enlightened while branding traditionalist women as slavish and benighted. What

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 257.

feminism presents as sophisticated theories of false consciousness and social construction are just ideological expedients through which to enforce this hierarchy, to enforce the buffered distance. Notwithstanding its universalistic veneer, feminism is just a case of interest group politics, an attempt by some women to appropriate the social capital previously enjoyed by another, complete with an ideology to rationalize this appropriation as something other than appropriation. If this violence goes unrecognized, this is only owing to the completeness of the feminist victory.

Lessig's analysis therefore captures only half the story. The identities of traditionalists are being threatened, not by freedom as such—Tribe's "eternal quest" for social "boundary-crossing"—but by a specific identity that is being promoted at their expense. They feel threatened by feminism, not simply because it imposes the burden of choice, but because feminists' claims to higher consciousness have as their ineluctable corollary the judgment that other women are beholden to a lower consciousness. This judgment is necessitated by the feminist identity, by a hero-system that must seek to discredit whatever might discredit it. If the right to abortion ambiguates the heretofore taken-for-granted identities of traditionalist women, it is also the case that the very existence of such women ambiguates the identities of feminists, highlighting these identities' socially constructed character simply by presenting an alternative. Feminists may compare themselves to Copernicus. But whereas a telescope can conclusively refute any dissent before the heliocentric theory, claims to higher consciousness can never stand on so secure a footing, and must be corroborated socially rather than experimentally, by denying the basic cognitive competence of women who refuse to recognize that consciousness as higher.

* * *

University of Virginia sociology professor and anti-feminist W. Bradford Wilcox celebrates that many smart post-feminist college women who in the past might have been expected to "gravitate to feminist academics" are now looking for "a sane path forward for the revival of courtship and family life."¹¹⁵ Wilcox's contraposition of traditional family life with "feminist academics" in particular rather than with female careers in general seems peculiar, given that it is only a minuscule fraction of the total female undergraduate population that gravitates toward academic careers in women's studies. But whether accurate or not, this contrast is symbolic of how conservatives understand the problem posed by feminism. The issue is not whether women will have more choices or fewer choices, or whether they will follow the professional model or raise children at home, but whether they will submit to the cognitive

¹¹⁵ Qt. in Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005), pg. 144.

elitism of feminists or resist it. The danger is not that too many women will pursue professional careers to the detriment of other values, but that these careers will redound to the cultural prestige of that elitism. The smart, post-feminist women who eschew feminist academics are not “self-effacing drudges,” but trailblazers in the struggle to overthrow that prestige, which is what conservatives above all resist.

Conservatives are often accused of seeking to “turn back the clock” on women’s issues as on much else. But *qua* claimants of cultural oppression, they are first and foremost driven, not to turn back the clock, but to “turn the tables” on the Left. Having become in their own way liberalized, they cannot prescribe traditional gender roles as uniquely appropriate for all women, and so they merely counsel the lucidity to see beyond the ideological illusions of feminism. *Qua* claimants of cultural oppression, conservatives are not stridently anti-feminist but amorphously “post-feminist,” as Wilcox says. They understand themselves as having seen through and beyond the meta-narrative of feminism much as post-modernists understanding themselves to have penetrated beyond the meta-narratives of modernity. Their argument is not that independence can never satisfy women but that the independence which feminism offers is merely one hero-system among others and not the transcendence of all hero-systems. Feminism is no more authentic than hearth and home because it offers women only another submersion of the individual in yet another collective, and a most impoverished one at that. Being a hero-system that mistakes itself for the transcendence of all hero-systems, feminism must continually dramatize this supposed transcendence and then inveigh against the world’s failure to recognize it. And this must inevitably propel feminists into an ever-deepening spirals of alienation, self-pity, and resentment that can never be assuaged and so are instead politicized as social critique.

By contrast, the post-feminist woman has become alert to the psychological traps through which feminism maintains its following, to the false blandishments offered by feminism’s “higher consciousness.” Gloria Steinem charges that fundamentalism offers safety and respectability at the cost of self-respect and freedom. But Steinem, counters Sommers, “herself knows a thing or two [about] how to recruit adherents to a cause by promises of ‘safety’ and ‘self-respect,’” because the “feminist orthodoxy she portrays promises safety in a sisterhood that will offer unhappy or insecure women a venue where they can build self-esteem and attain an authenticity enjoyed by no other group of women.”¹¹⁶ But the post-feminist woman promoted by conservative claims of cultural oppression rejects these false consolations and thereby achieves the true authenticity that turns traditional gender roles into a genuine option. She understands that feminism is foremost driven, not by abstractions like autonomy and equal

¹¹⁶ Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?*, pg. 260.

dignity, but by a visceral, moralistic hostility to these roles and to femininity, which is an affront to feminism's disciplinary impulses, a devolution toward the brute nature in opposition to which the buffered distance has been erected. Traditional women radiate an "animal negative-pole magnetism" to feminists. And the latter's sophisticated theories of patriarchally-induced false consciousness are merely sophisticated rationalizations for this visceral revulsion.

What liberals interpret as "attacks" on feminism, and by extension on women themselves, are merely self-defense as conservatives see it. For to expose feminism as a hero-system is to undermine feminists' claim to a higher consciousness, which is in turn to undermine their condescension toward traditionalist women. Sommers writes:

Earlier in this century, many households still had smelling salts on hand in the event that "delicate" women reacted to displays of male vulgarity by fainting. Today, women of delicacy have a new way to demonstrate their exquisitely fragile sensibilities: by explaining to anyone who will listen how they have been blighted and violated by some male's offensive coarseness. If nothing of a telling nature has recently happened to us, we can tell about how we felt on hearing what happened to others. We faint, "discursively" and publicly, at our humiliations at the hands of men.¹¹⁷

The message is that these feminists have not eschewed traditional moral sentiments to the extent they believe, and have rather surreptitiously incorporated some version of them into their sophisticated theorizations of patriarchal power relations. In fainting "discursively," feminists lend intellectualized, sublimated, and etherealized expression to the very traditionalism which they officially repudiate, endowing that traditionalism with an elaborate theoretical superstructure that conceals the character of the underlying impulses, which are *symmetrical* with those they repudiate as the tradition-enslaved products of false consciousness. Fainting discursively is precisely what may be expected of a hero-system that is disingenuously premised on the transcendence of all hero-systems.

The difference between feminists and traditionalists is not the difference between enlightenment and social illusion, but the difference between "modern" and "pre-modern" affective-instinctual structures, between more and less sublimated and intellectualized iterations of the same sentiments. Women of an earlier period straightforwardly acknowledged their emotional "delicacy," the "embodied feelings of the higher" the violation of which could induce fainting. But modern feminists have excarnated and sublimated those feelings into the *theoretical* delicacy with which they expose the subtle, ever-present machinations of patriarchal power. Talk of pervasive date rape and sexual harassment sounds more secular, sophisticated, and enlightened than moralistic laments about the decline of virginity and chastity. But the meta-censoriousness of the former is merely the intellectualized and secularized

¹¹⁷ Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism*, pg. 29.

reconfiguration of the censoriousness of the latter. It is not the subtraction of a benighted past but its mutation.

Coulter intuits this when she notes the contradiction that feminists rail against “sexist men” and “sexual harassment” “while simultaneously promoting the view that sex has no sacred purpose.”¹¹⁸ How, the question is, could sexual harassment be seriously demeaning, rather than just distracting or annoying, if the substratum of that harassment, sexuality itself, lacks the kind of significance which the benighted moral traditionalists assign to it? Feminists allege various power imbalances in favor of males. But such imbalances cannot standing alone explain why males should have the power to *denigrate* sexually, which presupposes a surreptitious reliance on tradition, on the special meaning that tradition assigns sexuality. Coulter is simply expressing her under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative, which always reveals symmetry where liberals see asymmetry. For here again, that narrative reveals that liberals secretly retain what they officially dismiss as the confining horizons of a benighted past, and this retention would seem to undermine their standing to criticize conservatives in the way that they do.

The mutation counter-narrative cannot settle anything as to the ultimate value of the feminist revolution. But it does explain why conservative claimants of cultural oppression have been unwilling to accept feminism’s self-understanding at face value, why there has always been a significant discrepancy between the number of Americans prepared to endorse what self-avowed feminists would proffer as their shortlist of basic principles and the number of Americans prepared to embrace the feminist label without qualification or reservation. Conservative claims of cultural oppression cannot be reduced to some “backlash” instigated at the behest of “Strict Father” morality. For that backlash is reaction against, not only women’s liberation, but also to the pragmatic contradiction of a universalism subserved by what is one historically constructed understanding of agency, a hero-system that provides some with a symbolic sustenance of which it threatens to deprive others. If conservatives refuse to adopt what is the “enlightened” perspective, this is because enlightenment is here as elsewhere the ideological veneer behind which this inequality is perpetrated.

4. The Powerful Driving Force of Snobbery

The mutation counter-narrative illuminates not only what are commonly designated as “social” or “cultural” issues—like gay rights or the status of women—but also a wide range of concerns that are less centrally associated with the “culture wars.” For cosmological orientation, the conflict of which is

¹¹⁸ Ann Coulter, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), pg. 9.

tracked by that narrative, must inflect a broad array of concerns and perceptions, propelling conservatives to discern the same pragmatic contradiction again and again. Ann Coulter is detecting this contradiction when she writes:

Only when you appreciate the powerful driving force of snobbery in the liberals' worldview do all their preposterous and counterintuitive arguments make sense. They promote immoral destructive behavior because they are snobs, they embrace criminals because they are snobs, they oppose tax cuts because they are snobs, they adore the environment because they are snobs. Every pernicious idea to come down the pike is instantly embraced by liberals to show how powerful they are. Liberals hate society and want to bring it down to reinforce their sense of invincibility. Secure in the knowledge that their beachfront haciendas will still be standing when the smoke clears, they giddily fiddle with the little people's rules and morals.¹¹⁹

This would seem like cheap psychologism and gratuitous outrageousness. But what may seem like just a protracted ad hominem tirade expresses conservatives' correct intuitive sense that liberal policy preferences embody a particular mode of transcendence that favors some identities to the detriment of others. This sense is not the arbitrary personal contrivance of conservatives, but the reflection of a particular historical legacy. What is the "sense of invincibility" which Coulter accuses liberals of seeking to reinforce other than the "new kind of invulnerability" represented by the buffered distance? And who are her "little people" with "little people's rules and morals" other than the "less fortunate peoples" who are relics of our "barbarian past"? Conservative claims to cultural oppression exhibit a *recurring logical structure*. And that structure is the mutation counter-narrative, which endows conservative claims of cultural oppression with their powerful resonance. If the trope of the beleaguered "ordinary American" trodden down by "liberal elites" has proven so versatile, this is because it is rooted in something *real*, the clash of cosmological orientations tracked by that narrative.

Liberals refuse to recognize this clash, however. Against Coulter, they believe that the "snobbery" of supporting redistributive taxation reveals a level of sociological sophistication that is usually missing among conservatives, who reject complicated accounts of socio-economic causation in favor of simplistic moralisms centered around "personal responsibility." Lakoff writes that Strict Father morality's stress on the ideal of moral strength "imposes a form of asceticism" that "rules out any explanation in terms of social forces or social class," this being incompatible with that morality's axiomatic equation of success with morality and failure with immorality.¹²⁰ In this vein, Lasch observes that the welfare professions were horrified to discover during the Great Depression "that many Americans, even victims of large-scale unemployment, still clung to the ethic of self-help and refused to acknowledge an individual's right to

¹¹⁹ Ann Coulter, *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002), pg. 27.

¹²⁰ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (The University of Chicago Press 2002), pg. 74-75.

relief.” Advocates of the welfare state “had to persuade the public that poverty should not be attributed to lack of enterprise; that the system, not the individual, was at fault; that dependence on public relief was no disgrace; and that self-help, in the era of organization, was a snare and a delusion.”¹²¹ As liberals see it, conservative morality and conservative anti-intellectualism are intimately related as different expressions of conservatives’ inability or unwillingness to take an objective view of the causal forces that actually shape our lives. Liberals do take cognizance of these forces, and this is why conservatives must attempt to discredit them as snobs, because the alternative is to acknowledge liberals’ superior insight and lucidity.

This liberal sophistication is taken to its logical conclusion in Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, where Rawls argues:

While the liberal conception seems clearly preferable to the system of natural liberty, intuitively it still appears defective. For one thing, even if it works to perfection in eliminating the influence of social contingencies, it still permits the distribution of wealth and income to be determined by the natural distribution of talents and abilities. Within the limits allowed by the background arrangements, distributive shares are decided by the outcome of the natural lottery; and this outcome is arbitrary from a moral perspective. There is no more reason to permit the distribution of income and wealth to be settled by the distribution of natural assets than by historical and social fortune... The extent to which natural capacities develop and reach fruition is affected by all kinds of social conditions and class attitudes. Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances.¹²²

Not only large-scale unemployment, but also lackluster willpower, are not misfortunes for which individuals may be fairly faulted once we acknowledge the causal chains in which our destinies are enmeshed. This is something that can be recognized from what Rawls sets forth as the “Original Position,” a hypothetical situation in which a society’s would-be citizens deliberate on the principles of justice that are to guide it under a “veil of ignorance.” This veil deprives the deliberators of any knowledge of the particular social position they will occupy, including their class, race, gender, natural talents, and even conception of the good. Knowing only basic truths about human psychology and social life, they can formulate principles of justice without being unreasonably influenced by particularistic interests and preferences. Being ignorant of their economic circumstances and native aptitudes into which they will be born, they will recognize that even a “willingness to make an effort” originate in factors lying beyond individual control. And this is why they will support economic redistribution to the extent the poorest are

¹²¹ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), pg. 218.

¹²² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pg. 1999), pg. 63-64.

not made worst off for it, because this is the rational position to adopt within the Original Position, which is also the moral position.

As in the case of feminism, the contrast is between the dispassionate sociological sophistication of liberals and the identitarian compulsions of conservatives, who cannot “step back” from their contingent identities in order to assess social and economic life from the disinterested vantage point that would reveal unjust privations for what they are. But also as in the case of feminism, this contraposition conceals what the mutation counter-narrative reveals, which is that even dispassionate sociological sophistication can carry identitarian significance. That the development of our natural capacities is a function of unchosen contingencies is beyond dispute. But whether one accedes to the Original Position is a function, not only of accurate knowledge, but of the overall human make-up, the extent to which the civilizing process has done its work. As we already observed with Elias, it was only because human agents developed “increased emotional control” and “a greater restraint of their spontaneous feeling” that they could suppress the default perception that “everything they experience and everything that concerns them takes its stamp from them, is the expression of an intention, a destiny, a purpose relating to themselves.” Only then, for example, can one recognize that the earth revolves around the sun notwithstanding how things appear within our first-person experience. The scientific revolution thus presupposed, not only a new method of investigation, but also a transformation in people’s basic sense of themselves away from anthropocentricity. So too does liberalism. If many Americans of the Great Depression era could not see their poverty as a failure of the system, this was because they felt that their circumstances expressed “an intention, a destiny, a purpose relating to themselves.” If liberals on the other hand understand poverty as a systematic problem, this is because they have transcended the anthropocentric perspective. Having internalized the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, they have overcome their everyday, embodied sense of themselves, separating their ultimate identities from the causal forces that have shaped their situations. This is why liberalism is the political expression of the buffered identity, the medium through which this identity’s structure is translated into moral and political argument.

Rawls denies that the Original Position carries anything like this meaning. Some people have understood the Original Position as implying a metaphysical conception of the person according to which “the essential nature of persons is independent of and prior to their contingent attributes, including their final ends and attachments, and indeed their conception of the good and character as a whole.” But Rawls disagrees:

I believe this to be an illusion caused by not seeing the original position as a device of representation. The veil of ignorance, to mention one prominent feature of that position, has no specific metaphysical implications concerning the nature of the self; it does not imply that the self is ontologically prior to the facts about persons that the parties are excluded from knowing. We can, as it were, enter this position at any time simply by reasoning from principles of justice in accordance with the enumerated restrictions on information. When, in this way, we simulate being in the original position, our reasoning no more commits us to a particular metaphysical doctrine about the nature of the self than our acting a part in a play, say of Macbeth or Lady Macbeth, commits us to thinking that we are really a king or a queen engaged in a desperate struggle for political power...¹²³

But political liberals can easily recognize that the harms and indignities of coerced religious oaths cannot be eliminated by the suggestion that the coerced party is always at liberty to withhold some inner mental assent from what they appear to be affirming, that they are no more required to actually believe the content of the oath than an actor is required to believe that he is Macbeth. They can recognize that the oath constitutes a form of self-betrayal that is not cured by labeling it a “device of representation.” An oath may be a device of representation. But *using* that device is a human act that may or may not be consonant with an individual’s self-understanding. It implies a way of seeing oneself, which is not the less real for being temporary and calculated.

This is also why people who have not already internalized the buffered identity will not be coaxed into adopting the original position. For this device of representation is the ultimate symbol of the disciplines and repressions of that identity. And the conviction that resists these disciplines and repressions is just as “real” as the convictions that have throughout history resisted coerced religious oaths. This is hardly surprising given that the buffered identity is very much a product of religion. Nietzsche writes:

I have discovered the arrogant theologian-instinct wherever anyone today feels himself to be an ‘idealist’ – wherever anyone assumes, by virtue of a higher origin, a right to cast strange and superior looks at actuality....Just like the priest, the idealist has all the great conceptions in his hand...., he plays them out with a benevolent contempt against the ‘understanding’, the ‘senses’, honours’, ‘luxury’, ‘science’, he sees these things as *beneath* him, as harmful and seductive forces above which ‘the spirit’ soars in pure self-sufficiency – as though humility, chastity, poverty, in a word *holiness*, had not hitherto done life unutterably more harm than any sort of frightfulness or vice whatever....Pure spirit is pure lie...¹²⁴

Understood in the context of the mutation counter-narrative, Rawls’s Original Position is a secularized and intellectualized iteration of this “arrogant theologian-instinct,” just another way of casting “strange and superior looks at actuality.” Those embracing it have not renounced honors or luxury in their personal

¹²³ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pg. 27

¹²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin Books, 1990), pg. 131-32.

lives, or argued that anyone is obligated to do so. But they have effected a sublimated, intellectualized, and etherialized recapitulation of that renunciation in their embrace of liberal politics, one more way in which modernity has built renunciation into everyday life. In demanding that we look upon our everyday social identities detachedly, as a confluence of contingent, arbitrary causal forces, the Original Position requires that we be “in the world” but not “of it”—just as the Religious Reformers recommended. While Lakoff charges that conservatism “imposes a form of asceticism” inimical to a sophisticated understanding of social causality, that sophisticated understanding presupposes an asceticism of its own, the secularized asceticism of the buffered identity. This is an asceticism that reaches, not only conduct, but also our basic sense of ourselves. For it is what allows us to rise above our default, “enfleshed” modes of human perception and recognize our own personal attributes—like a “willingness to make an effort”—as assets with which we have been arbitrarily entrusted by forces lying “outside us.” Whereas the asceticism of Strict Father morality pertains to one’s desires, the asceticism of liberalism reaches to our consciousness, requiring us to view our own qualities as in some sense “beneath” us, as mere sensuousness that must not be permitted to contaminate the higher reaches of awareness symbolized by the Original Position. As I argued in Chapter 6, the difference between liberals and conservatives is not that liberals reject the ascetic self-restraint officially celebrated by conservatives, but that they have internalized this asceticism all the more thoroughly.

It is this theological inheritance that permits Bobos to engage in what Brooks calls “socially approved act of antistatus deviance,” the practice of “mocking your own success in a manner that simultaneously displays your accomplishments and your ironic distance from them.”¹²⁵ Whether this ironic distance be expressed politically and philosophically through the Original Position or just socially, by sitting amidst success and affluence while affecting that these are random events that befell one by happenstance, it is the expression of an aspiration toward spiritual transcendence of which liberal egalitarianism is one expression. It is this transcendence that allows us to see our virtues as mere assets, and so see others’ vices as just a poverty of assets. While liberals will describe this transcendence as “objectivity” or “impartiality,” they describe themselves in “innocently thin terms.” For the mutation counter-narrative reveals this impartiality to be a spiritual stance, a drive to rise above the “peculiarly human emotions” in order to, as Nietzsche says, “soar in pure self-sufficiency” to achieve a special self-possession that would liberate rational cognition from the contingency and happenstance that blinkers the judgment of the benighted.

¹²⁵ David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: the New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pg. 50.

This unacknowledged layer of social meaning is one important reason why some conservatives will vote against their rational economic interests if only to defy the snobbery of the liberal elites. Peter Binzen's *Whitetown U.S.A.: A First-Hand study of How the "Silent Majority" Lives, Learns, Works, and Thinks*, is a sociological case study of the Philadelphia neighborhood of Kensington which, as related by Charles Murray, "portrayed a tightly knit, family oriented, hard-drinking, hardworking, hard-fighting blue-collar neighborhood that felt persecuted by the government and disdained by the elites." One source of the tension between the community and the government was that the residents appeared inordinately proud of their community notwithstanding the urban blight that beset it. Much to the exasperation of the social services establishment, they adopted a stoic stance in the face of this adversity, treating it as a given rather than a problem. "Kensingtonians are psychologically unable to face up to their social, cultural, and economic deprivation," explained one Philadelphia social services administrator: "Pride prevents them from taking advantage of social services. For them to accept these services might be to admit that they're not all they claim to be."¹²⁶

Here as in the feminism context, liberalism cannot advance its agenda without announcing to a great many people that "they're not all they claim to be," which is why liberalism cannot but provoke conservative claims of cultural oppression. The hard-working, hard-drinking residents of Kensington could not accept public assistance because to have done so would also have been to accede to the secularized asceticism of the buffered identity and therefore to surrender their own hero-system before that of the social service establishment. Believing in "an honest day's wage for an honest day's work," they understand the "willingness to make an effort" in an enfleshed rather than excarnated way, as a component of personal identity rather than the product of contingent causal forces. And so they could not enter the original position and recognize that they are entitled to public assistance. For the ordinary American's self-respect may be undermined once the ordinary virtues—hard work, self-control, and so forth—are conceptualized non-anthropocentrically, not as signifiers of metaphysical merit, but, as per Rawls, as assets with which individuals have been arbitrarily entrusted. Where we once had virtues and vices, we now have adaptations to circumstance, the existence of causal forces whose operation does not redound to anyone's credit. For the kind of identity which could claim credit has been eviscerated, replaced by the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. In imposing this ethos, liberalism begrudges ordinary Americans the dignity of their rugged stoicism before life's contingencies, the self-reliant spirit that would no more complain about inequitable income distribution than the pioneers of the

¹²⁶ Qt. in Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012), pg. 211-12.

American frontier would have complained about a dust storm or a frosty winter. Socio-economic theories of poverty may be in some sense more “accurate” than moralistic ones. But what separates the anointed and the benighted is not accuracy and knowledge but hero-system and cosmological orientation. And it is only as the privileged carriers of the high heroism of the buffered identity that liberals can *afford* to devalue the everyday virtue of others, can afford their “strange and superior looks at actuality.” It is in this unearned privilege that their “snobbery” ultimately consists.

* * *

What Coulter decries as the liberal snobbery of embracing criminals can be understood in the same way. Nussbaum writes that jurors who are asked to respond to murderers with disgust are

urged precisely *not* to have the thought, “there, but for...go I.” But in reality, it seems likely that all human beings are capable of evil, and that many, if not most, of the hideous evildoers are warped by circumstances, both social and personal, which play a large role and sometimes decisive role in explaining the evil that they do. If jurors are led to think that evil is done by monsters who just were born different, are freaky and inhuman, they will be prevented from having thoughts about themselves and their own society that are highly pertinent, not only to the equal and principled application of the law, but also to the construction of a society in which less evil will exist.¹²⁷

To think “there, but for...go I” is to understand the criminal’s present make-up, not as a primordial phenomenon, but as the rationally comprehensible byproduct of the circumstances that we have been privileged to avoid but must now take into account. For conservatives, however, the thought “there, but for...go I” is much less compelling. Sowell writes:

[W]hen Chief Justice Earl Warren responded to indignant outcries against criminals by calling the people who make such outcries “self-righteous,” he was making a statement whose validity depended on adopting the cosmic viewpoint. From such a viewpoint, particular individuals might turn out to be either criminals or law-abiding citizens as a result of innumerable influences resulting from the accidental circumstances into which they were born and which they chanced to encounter as they grew up: there but for the grace of God go I. However, if one is nowhere close to being either God or the cosmos, the question becomes: Now that criminals are what they are, for whatever reasons, how are we to deal with them and protect all other people. If it were oneself who was the criminal, the policy issue would be the same. The constrained options of the tragic vision permit no policies based on indulgences in cosmic questions—or cosmic dogmatism as to causation.¹²⁸

While Sowell criticizes the hubris with which the anointed presume to possess the cognitive wherewithal to discern a criminal defendant’s just deserts on the basis of socio-economic causation, the core of his

¹²⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2004), pg. 167.

¹²⁸ Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), pg. 191.

disagreement with Nussbaum is not empirical. For he appears to accept her basic premise concerning the role of social and personal circumstances in shaping what kinds of people we become. The crux of the disagreement concerns, not the facts, but how we are obligated to view them. And this is, at bottom, a disagreement about how we are obligated to view *people*. As K. Anthony Appiah observes, the “encumbered self, laden with all the specificity of its manifold allegiances, is not something we can, [as a rule] be bound to respect.”¹²⁹ And whereas Nussbaum is urging us to view the criminal as something over and above the specificity of his manifold allegiances, Sowell is announcing that we are justified in looking upon him in precisely such terms, as the flesh-and-blood individuals before us, regardless of how biology, environment, and chance may have colluded in his formation.

Sowell understands his stance to reflect, not self-righteousness, or hiding from humanity, or a lack of sociological sophistication, but rather the humility to recognize that the cosmic viewpoint is precluded to finite beings such as we are. But what Sowell casts in epistemological terms—as a position about the limits of our knowledge—is on the level of cosmological orientation a rejection of the secularized asceticism of the buffered identity. If Sowell describes the “cosmic” or God’s-eyed view as not just imprudent and impracticable but moreover as the vain self-indulgence of those who are “nowhere close to being either God or the cosmos,” this is to signal his rejection of the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, whose hubris motivates the cosmic viewpoint. Sowell is here rejecting liberalism as a spiritual stance, liberalism as “arrogant theologian-instinct.” To think “there but for the grace of God go I” is to endorse liberalism’s secular-spiritual compression by incorporating the God’s-eyed perspective into secular affairs, and thereby to see the criminal as possessed of a “soul” that may be disentangled from the earthly matter of its contingent empirical embodiment. But from the perspective of relative pre-moderns who resist that compression, this is to arrogate God’s prerogative in a vain attempt to step beyond the human condition, to presume to see the soul that only God can truly see. As with redistributive taxation, liberals are engaged in an empty pretense—“strange and superior looks at actuality”—arrogating to themselves the right to rise above the contingency to which the rest of us are resigned as the unremarkable backdrop of life. If liberals will not take their criminals as they come—laden with the specificity of their manifold allegiances—this is once again but a secularized iteration of the theologian’s benevolent contempt for the senses, one more attempt to impose the liberal hero-system upon those who do not share this contempt.

¹²⁹ Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, pg. xv.

Coulter recounts the case of convicted murderer Jacob John Dougan, who as leader of the “Black Liberation Army” wanted to “indiscriminately kill white people and thus start a revolution.” Having murdered an eighteen-year-old white hitchhiker, Dougan “then made a tape describing [the] murder in gruesome detail, which he mailed to the victim’s mother and...the media,” avowing that he “enjoyed every minute of it” and “loved watching the blood gush from his eyes.” Yet Judge Rosemary Barkett, the Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court, voted to overturn his death sentence, arguing:

[T]his killing was effectuated to focus attention and a chronic and pervasive illness of racial discrimination and of hurt, sorrow, and rejection. Throughout Dougan’s life his resentment to bias and prejudice festered. His impatience for change, for understanding, for reconciliation matured to taking the illogical and drastic action of murder. His frustrations, his anger, and his obsession of injustice overcame reason. The victim was a symbolic representation of the class causing the perceived injustice.¹³⁰

Offering as she is the picture of a liberal elite excusing black-on-white violence as compensation for historic racial grievances, Coulter would seem engaged in the most flagrant of backlash politics. But backlash politics operates atop a struggle against the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, against the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity which they inculcate. Judge Barkett’s argument served to affirm this ethos. She held that Dugan’s victim was a symbolic representation of racial injustice. But this very conceptualization is a symbolic representation of her liberal privilege, of a hero-system that aspires to rise above the enfleshed condition of ordinary moral judgment, to rise above the “peculiarly human emotions” that are naturally elicited by Dugan’s cruelty and instead see Dugan as he would be apart from his circumstances—to instead see his soul in its pristine, uncorrupted goodness. By contrast with Sowell, Nussbaum omits “for the grace of God,” from her formulations. But this omission does not eliminate what the mutation counter-narrative reveals to be the sedimentation of the past in the present, the origins of the modern liberal identity in this aspiration to spiritual transcendence. And it is only a short step from here to discerning the “snobbery” with which liberals arrogate a privilege that others acquiescing in the “peculiarly human emotions” are too modest to allow themselves.

It is easy enough to detect self-aggrandizing identitarian motivations in the retributivism of the conservative “model citizen.” But conservatives detect an analogous identitarianism in “enlightened” opposition to retributivism. Judge Bazelon dismissed retributivism as a relic of our barbarian past, arguing that the “need to punish” is a “primitive urge” expressing the “deep childish fear that with any reduction of punishment, multitudes would run amuck.”¹³¹ But if the conservative “need to punish” is a “primitive

¹³⁰ Coulter, *Godless*, pg. 39-40.

¹³¹ Sowell, *Vision of the Anointed*, pg. 22.

urge,” then no less so is liberals’ “need to understand.” For the latter originates in the aspiration to spiritual transcendence expressed by the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, which liberal “understanding” works to impose in this context as well, generating the same pragmatic contradiction as elsewhere. As with the question of economic redistribution, what liberals see as their superior cognizance of social causality is on the level of cosmological orientation the incursion of one hero-system against another, not simply the elucidation of an idea but the imposition of a way of being.

* * *

Though Nunberg would complain that the social conscience of liberals has been unfairly caricatured as social pretension, these caricatures express conservatives’ primordial Nietzschean intuition that “Pure spirit is pure lie,” that liberalism’s highest ideals embody origins that liberals cannot in their rationalism and “enlightenment” acknowledge. Nietzsche writes:

The *other* idiosyncrasy of philosophers is no less perilous: it consists in mistaking the last for the first. They put that which comes at the end – unfortunately! for it ought not come at all! – the ‘highest concepts’, that is to say the most general, the emptiest concepts, the last fumes of evaporating reality, at the beginning *as* the beginning. It is again only the expression of their way of doing reverence: the higher must not be *allowed* to grow out of the lower, must not be *allowed* to have grown at all... Moral: everything of the first rank must be *causa sui*...All supreme values are of the first rank, all the supreme concepts – that which is, the unconditioned, the good, the true, the perfect – all that cannot have become, *must* therefore be *causa sui*.¹³²

Whether the “supreme concept” in question be Rawls’s Original Position or Nussbaum’s “there, but for...go I,” conservative claimants of cultural oppression understand it as having grown out of the pre-rational, pre-cognitive transformation of the overall human make-up chronicled by the mutation counter-narrative. And this is why they refuse to recognize these concepts as “the good, the true, the perfect.” What Nietzsche calls an idiosyncrasy of philosophers is also an idiosyncrasy of liberals. For this is what blinds liberals to their supreme concepts’ origins in the secularized asceticism imposed by the civilizing process, blinds them to how their rarefied ideals originate in something as primitive, unconscious, and animal as what Elias calls “the retrained instinctual and affective impulses denied direct access to the motor apparatus.” Operating as they do out of a more naturalistic cognition of human agency, conservatives have a greater intuitive appreciation for these origins, which necessarily color their assessments of liberalism and liberals.

This attunedness is why Ben Shapiro could as we saw in Chapter 1 accuse Obama of “bullying” a group of businesspeople when he admonished that they cannot claim sole credit for their

¹³² Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/Anit-Christ*, pg. 4.

accomplishments because they availed themselves of a social infrastructure, which now imposes reciprocal social obligations. Where liberals see the assertion of facts and a common sense moral inference from those facts, conservatives see meta-censoriousness, a sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized variant of the badgering and scolding through which modern elites have always advanced their agenda. This is why they resent being “lectured to” by liberals. Where liberals discern supreme concepts, conservative claimants of cultural oppression are more strongly impressed by these concepts’ *origins* in the civilizing process, and so see in those concepts what Nietzsche calls “the last fumes of evaporating reality,” or what Westen calls “cheap neural perfume.” Hence their easy willingness to reduce liberal ideals to bullying, which is all their naturalistic processing of human agency can reveal. Though “anti-intellectual” on some levels, this reductionism remains meaningful as an articulation of the mutation counter-narrative. Coulter condemns liberals as people who “secure behind the guns of a civilian police force in a democratic society—and in many cases, doorman buildings, private security forces, bodyguards, and gated communities—make a sport of demanding that the guilty be set free.”¹³³ Liberals may not in fact avail themselves of these amenities any more than anyone else. But what they *do* stand securely behind is the buffered distance, a civilizational identity for which the civilized amenities of doorman buildings and gated communities are being invoked as stand-in symbols. “Snobbery” is an imputation of social artifice that expresses the buffered identity’s status as a historical artifice—as one historically constructed understanding of human agency among others.

This is not to suggest that no one who has not first of all internalized the buffered identity could ever be induced to support redistributive taxation or the rehabilitation of criminals. But it is to argue that any such support or its absence is a function of the hero-system in which the policy stakes are embedded, and the embeddedness of liberal policies in the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity renders those policies repugnant to many people, for these are exactly what render liberalism “out of touch” with ordinary Americans. Lasch observes that in defending their ideals of individualism, social mobility, and self-realization, the liberals of the 1960s “defended the underdog in an upper-class accent.”¹³⁴ This accent consists in the buffered distance and is the reason why liberalism exudes a certain cultural foreignness to many people. As we saw with Cover, abstract rights are always rooted in culture-specific designs of particularist meaning. And conservatives are opposing just such a design when they oppose redistributive taxation as elitist snobbery.

¹³³ Coulter, *Godless*, pg. 54.

¹³⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), pg. 36.

It might be objected that this is to over-intellectualize our politics. For the significance of social policies never gets articulated at this level of philosophical abstraction. But this objection itself commits the philosopher's error of over-intellectualizing the realm of the intellect. Occluding from view what the New Enlightenment reveals to be the intellect's fundamental continuity with more visceral levels of human experience, the objection obscures what Bourdieu calls the "imperceptible cues of bodily *hexis*," through which the philosophical abstractions are in the first instance *lived*. For this is what conservative claims of cultural oppression are ultimately addressing.

Those imperceptible cues are the background of Kahane's warning to conservatives that they harbor no illusions about the nature of liberals, who are "Pride Incarnate, brimming at once with anger, resentment, and an overweening moral superiority based on nothing more than...[their] own inflated self-esteem."¹³⁵ Needless to say, these unflattering traits do not reveal themselves to liberals' introspection. And nor should they, for the arrogance and condescension that Kahane detects are not data of consciousness, but the logical corollaries of the buffered identity *viewed from outside of the cultural matrix within which it arises*. Conservatives' ad hominem refer, not to any hidden motivations, but to the buffered distance as it must be interpreted by those standing outside it, by those for whom "surrender to the prompting of the senses," to the brute givenness of things, is unproblematic—the brute givenness of Jacob John Dougan, for example, or the brute givenness of a "willingness to make an effort." Liberals experience the decentering of lived experience of the buffered identity as a rational universalism that stands above bare "inclination," as Kant would say. But from the perspective of those standing outside of that identity, this universalism must be processed as an egoistic pretense, an *ersatz* hero-system that refuses to acknowledge its own vacuity. Pride, anger, resentment, and overweening moral superiority based on bloated self-esteem are simply an alternative interpretation of the buffered identity's virtues. They are what remains of its sense of dignity, freedom, invulnerability, and control once it is deprived of its positive ethical substance—just as "animus" is what remains of traditional morality once it is eviscerated of its ethical substance. Where conservative claimants of cultural oppression see snobbery, liberals see insight and empathy. These are not two competing hypotheses one of which might be debunked, but rather two sides of the same coin, the same phenomenon as interpreted from different positions along the civilizing process.

This realization should temper liberal indignation toward conservatives. If the guilt of Jacob John Dougan is mitigated by the fact that his victim had become the symbolic representation of a long history

¹³⁵ David Kahane, *Rules for Radical Conservatives: Beat the Left at Its Own Game to Take Back America* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), pg. 155.

of racial injustice, then surely whatever irrationality can be imputed to conservative claims of cultural oppression is likewise mitigated by the fact that their targets have become symbolic representations of the meta-equal protection problem, of liberal privilege. Liberals ask conservatives to think the thought “there but for the grace of God go I” when it comes to criminals. But they will not do so themselves in their attacks on conservatives. And so they once again lend intellectualized, sublimated, and etherealized expression to the very sin which they condemn in conservatives.

5. A World of Victims, Villains, and Rescuers

Shelby Steele writes that racial preferences “implicitly mark whites with an exaggerated superiority just as they mark blacks with an exaggerated inferiority,” reinforcing America’s oldest racial myth and further stigmatizing the already stigmatized.¹³⁶ As we observed in Chapter 3, conservative claimants of cultural oppression charge liberals with a crypto-racism, accusing that what liberals present as efforts to remedy racism or its legacy—like affirmative action and multiculturalism—are themselves part of that legacy, introducing a new, subtler forms of racial stigmatization that liberals will not acknowledge. Liberals will insist that their race consciousness is just a temporary corrective needed to redress the inequality bequeathed to us by historical racism. But conservatives believe that the kind of color-consciousness which liberals uphold cannot be so readily distinguished from the kind they condemn.

Liberals naturally dismiss these arguments as just another conservative sleight-of-hand. For the inferiority presupposed by America’s oldest racial myth and the “inferiority” presupposed by affirmative action, if such it be called, are two completely different animals. There a big difference between recognizing race in order to rectify historical injustice and doing so in order to perpetuate it, just as there is a big difference between supporting affirmative action in order to redress historically bequeathed inequalities and supporting it because one believes the beneficiary is a biological inferior who cannot be helped in any other way. The conservative argument glibly abstracts both color-consciousness and color-blindness from the specific contexts in which they actually operate, disregarding the whole range of factors that endow them with their concrete moral and political meanings. Liberals take note of these of these meanings, which dissolve the hypocrisy that conservatives imagine they detect in liberal rhetoric.

But the spuriousness of the distinctions upon which liberals insist is for Steele illustrated by Maureen Dowd’s critique of Justice Thomas’s dissenting opinion in the Michigan case upholding the constitutionality of affirmative action. This was, Steele writes, “one of the most vile columns” he has ever

¹³⁶ Shelby Steele, *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006), pg. 120.

seen in print.¹³⁷ Dowd had argued that Justice Thomas should be “grateful” for affirmative action rather than complaining about it. And so “thinking herself quite incapable of racism,” she “effectively calls Justice Thomas a nigger who—given his fundamental inferiority—should show ‘gratitude’ to his white betters.”¹³⁸ Dowd doubtlessly defended affirmative action as an effort to compensate for a socially produced inferiority, rather than to accommodate a genetic one. But in suggesting that *gratitude* was in order, she unwittingly betrayed a subterranean racism lying underneath her official, sociologically sophisticated and morally palatable stance. Social justice pure and simple does not need to be reciprocated with the gratitude Dowd was expecting from Thomas, and so this expectation had to originate in something more nefarious, the conviction that blacks are fundamentally inferior and undeserving.

Steele’s argument is *precisely what could be expected to follow* from what I have argued is conservatives’ less rationalistic, more naturalistic understanding of human agency. If conservatives blur or de-emphasize distinctions that liberals believe are dispositive, this is because they reject Old Enlightenment reason and see these distinctions as pertaining only to the “shallow part of our being,” the part of our being that is easily put into words. Historical and sociological explanations for minority underachievement are the products of intellectual, moral, and emotional self-discipline. But before these rational reflections can make their appearance, the raw perception of inferiority as reinforced by the practice of affirmative action may provoke a reaction that is more reflexive, more primal, and so more compelling psychologically than the conclusions of rational reflection, which operates atop of something more primordial. This is why Steele writes that “[h]owever this inferiority [of blacks] is explained—and it is easily enough explained by the myriad deprivations that grew out of our oppression—it is still inferiority. There are explanations, and then there is the fact.”¹³⁹ And the fact carries a significance for us that is never fully dissolved by the explanations. Racial preferences can be defended philosophically without reference to inherent black inferiority. But these defenses may be powerless to eliminate the pre-theorized “nonexplicit engagement with the world” that ostensibly benign forms of race consciousness must engender, in Dowd’s case yielding the picture of black *need* and the *noblesse oblige* of a magnanimous white response to that need—for which Thomas proved ungrateful. As a hero-system that misunderstands itself as the transcendence of all hero-systems, liberalism cannot recognize this layer of its own motivations. And so liberals cannot but become stupefied by what they judge to be the glibness of the conservative argument. But what liberals dismiss as unsophisticated conceptual elision is in fact

¹³⁷ Ibid., pg. 143.

¹³⁸ Ibid., pg. 147.

¹³⁹ Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character* (St. Martin’s Press, 1990), pg. 116.

the ultimate in sophistication, because it addresses itself to those layers of human experience that liberal rationalism cannot acknowledge. Liberals may trust their enhanced ACCs to detect and suppress whatever visceral racism color-consciousness might stimulate in the conservative amygdala. But the Dowd incident revealed that ACC to be less reliable than they like to think.

Dowd's slip of the pen corroborated conservatives' central suspicion that the anointed, as Sowell says, inhabit a "world of victims, villains, and rescuers, with the anointed cast in the last and most heroic of these roles."¹⁴⁰ This enviable position is maintained by seizing upon "particular beneficiary groups chosen to symbolize their moral stances," groups that therefore serve as the "human mascots" through which the anointed can maintain their heroic posture.¹⁴¹ With the mascots having been established as the victims and the anointed as the rescuers, any who would oppose the demands which the rescuers issue on behalf of the victims become the villains. Liberals adopt the moral stances they do in furtherance of a heroic narrative that places them at center stage and conscripts other groups as props of one kind or another: "The prime requisite for both mascots and targets is that they must distinguish the anointed from the benighted. Just as groups disdained by others become eligible to be mascots of the anointed, so groups respected by others are eligible to become targets."¹⁴² The vision of the anointed thus "arbitrarily singles out some particular kind of individual or group to be made sacred and leaves others to be sacrificed on the altar of this sacredness."¹⁴³ In this way do the anointed display what Jean-Francois Revel calls "a pitiless ferocity toward some" and "a boundless indulgence toward others."¹⁴⁴

This combination of ferocity and indulgence is the direct outgrowth of what we have observed to be liberalism's pragmatic contradiction, the way its universalism is inflected by a hero-system. Though liberals may seek to uplift the downtrodden, they do so as part and parcel of an effort to advance a heroic narrative wherein they enjoy a privileged role, and for which others must always pay the price. The price was here paid by Justice Thomas who like all designated victims can enjoy the beneficence of the anointed and their victim/villain/rescuer narrative only inasmuch as he acknowledges that narrative and the anointed's status within it as rescuers. But in repudiating affirmative action, Thomas denied that narrative and status, and so became exposed to the racial prejudice from which liberal blacks are shielded. Thomas should have showed gratitude to his white betters because he was undeserving. And he was undeserving because he would not acquiesce in the liberal dispensation, which is what elicited the pitiless ferocity of

¹⁴⁰ Sowell, *Vision of the Anointed*, pg. 249.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 143.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pg. 168.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pg. 209.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 151.

Maureen Dowd. The anointed have not eliminated the racism in their hearts but merely *circumscribed it in accordance with a particular hero-system*. Most conservatives oppose affirmative action. But it is only the black conservative who threatens the political identities of those who promote affirmative action. And so they must be discredited at any price, including the price of racism.

It is a recurring theme of conservative claims of cultural oppression that liberals have simply politicized all the ancient bigotries that they would associate with conservatives. The individualities of blacks, women, and gays are no longer submerged into the collective as defined by traditional stereotypes, but they are submerged into the collective as defined by the expectation that these groups ally themselves with the Left. And all the old prejudices will rear their ugly heads whenever these expectations are defied. Michelle Malkin writes that “[e]very minority conservative in public life has stories of being tarred as an “Oreo,” “coconut,” or “banana” (black/brown/yellow on the outside, white on the inside).¹⁴⁵ And likewise with conservative women. They are, Gallagher says, disdained by liberals as “mouthy women.”¹⁴⁶ Coulter observes that Democrats “reserve unfathomable venom, often coupled with physical violence, for conservative women.”¹⁴⁷ Victims who refuse their roles as victims deprive liberals of their roles as rescuers. And so they are punished by being branded as villains—oreos, coconuts, and bananas—traitors to liberalism who no longer deserve the protection of its principles. Being the playing out of a hero-system, liberal political morality is always “thicker” in its practical application than it is in its theoretical self-representation. For its commitment to equality is necessarily vitiated by the inequality that is intrinsic to the buffered distance, which limits the extent to which the benefit of liberal principles may be extended to conservatives, relics of a benighted past who have yet to achieve the rational autonomy that would qualify them for the protection of liberal principles.

D’Souza is discerning this same thickness when he argues that the affirmative action policies that were once in place at the University of California were particularly objectionable for their discriminatory impact on high-achieving Asians, who were often denied admission notwithstanding their impressive credentials in order to make room for the lower-achieving minorities favored by those policies. These preferential treatment policies, ostensibly instituted to help minorities, “appeared to be hurting a minority group which could scarcely be blamed for the past injuries and deprivations inflicted on indigenous American minorities, such as blacks.”¹⁴⁸ Indeed, many Asians like the Vietnamese boat people

¹⁴⁵ Michelle Malkin, *Unhinged: Exposing Liberals Gone Wild* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005), pg. 113.

¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁷ Ann Coulter, *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob Is Endangering America* (New York: Crown Forum, 2011), pg. 290.

¹⁴⁸ Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free, 1991), pg. 29.

had themselves suffered significant deprivations.¹⁴⁹ One reason for university administrators' insensitivity to this injustice, D'Souza suggests, was that most Asians could not serve the Left's ideologized conception of diversity:

Berkeley's Asian American students contribute to this visual diversity. Yet in another sense they stand in sharp contrast to the mood of languorous abandon. Most of them are impeccably groomed, conservative in dress, moderate in manner. They were not to be seen among the group cheering the man from San Quentin. In a subtle yet unmistakable way, the Asian American demeanor is a challenge to the ethos of the 1960s. Asians do not satisfy an understanding of diversity that requires unconventional attire, involvement in assorted causes, and a general identification with the counterculture. In this sense, they remain outsiders at Berkeley.¹⁵⁰

Conservatives are sometimes accused of seizing upon Asian Americans as the "good minority" in contraposition to which the alleged vices of other minorities can be highlighted. But at the level of conservative claims of cultural oppression, the target is not other minorities but the very self-understanding of liberalism. If affirmative action is not actually applied in accordance with the moral principles by which it is defended, this is because those principles subserve a hero-system. Affirmative action can be defended in terms of politically non-sectarian principles—rectification of historical injustice, compensation for unfair deprivations. But the case of the Asians illustrates how the full implications of those principles will be ignored when they do not line up with the liberal hero-system. Asians' historical innocence as villains and frequent suffering as victims are ignored because Asians' cultural conservatism is incongruous with liberalism's victim/villain/rescuer narrative. If Asians will not see themselves as victims, then liberals cannot see themselves as rescuers. And if liberals cannot see themselves as rescuers, then the moral calculus that liberals would otherwise apply becomes inapplicable to the party in question, in this case Asians. Whereas politically conservative blacks and women have gained the wrath of liberals, culturally conservative Asians have only incurred their indifference. But the underlying logic is the same, the logic of a hero-system. Both cases illustrate that liberals' anti-racist universalism is inflected by the buffered distance, which is always guiding the concrete application of their universalism. Only inasmuch as minorities repudiate a benighted past of political or cultural conservatism that can they qualify as the objects of liberals' special solicitude.

This is not intellectually vacuous psychologism, but a corollary of the New Enlightenment. As we saw in the last chapter, Lakoff believes that the victim, villain, hero dramatic structure is a neurological universal, whose content may vary but whose structure determines the basic parameters of our political thinking. And this creates symmetries that liberals fail to recognize. If conservatives must, in accordance

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pg. 33.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 32.

with their Strict Father morality, designate some people as evil Others through opposition to whom “Moral Order” can be affirmed, then liberals may have an equally powerful psychological *need* to designate some people as social and historical victims requiring *their* particular brand of nurturance, and to derivatively designate all who oppose these efforts as villains. If conservatives have various open “slots” into which one or another “bigoted clause” may be inserted, then it stands to reason that liberals have open slots available for one or another “nurturing clause,” the justification for which is a post-hoc rationalization for the maintenance of a synaptically encoded narrative. The vice of conservatives may be scapegoating, but then the vice of liberals is reverse-scapegoating. If conservatives are accused of unfairly singling out one segment of society to saddle it with responsibility for all of society’s ills, then liberals unfairly single out certain segments of society as unique repositories of moral capital. In doing so, they create scapegoats-by-default, which is anyone who obstructs the role with which liberals have anointed themselves. Liberals can be blind to these tendencies by virtue of their Old Enlightenment self-conceptions, which prevents them from recognizing liberalism as a hero-system that seeks to perpetuate the social meanings upon which it is predicated at the expense of other values, including truth and logical consistency. Truth may be a more or less frequent byproduct of the liberal dispensation under some conditions, but it is not what motivates it, which are the requirements of a hero-system.

Conservatives could not have hoped for a starker illustration of this than the Duke lacrosse scandal, when a group of Duke University lacrosse players were accused of raping a black stripper, Crystal Mangum, after she had been hired to perform at a party, pillorying her with racial epithets in the process. But the case was problematic from the outset, given that Mangum had changed her story multiple times, at one point accusing a player who was provably absent from the scene. But with an overzealous district attorney having withheld exculpatory DNA evidence, the players lived with the charges hanging over their heads for a full year before being completely exonerated. The district attorney was later disbarred for his ethical misconduct.¹⁵¹

What most interested conservatives, however, was not the unethical behavior of the district attorney, but the reactions of Duke faculty and other liberals who, rather than extending a presumption of innocence to the accused, seized upon the incident as an illustration of rampant racism and sexism. Many faculty, observes David Horowitz, depicted the students as modern-day heir of white slave masters and lynch mobs, and some called for their expulsion, as the specific question of their guilt or innocence became subordinated to an ideological agenda for which the players, not yet convicted of anything, served

¹⁵¹ David Horowitz and Jacob Laskin, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America’s Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), pg. 13.

as symbols. One professor raged against the evils of “while, male, athletic privilege” while another denounced the Duke administration for the “abhorrent sexual assault, verbal racial violence, and drunken white male privilege loosed amongst us,” sneering at the “timorous piety and sentimental legalism” of those who counseled restraint.¹⁵² Another professor confessed that the story resonated with her own personal experience: “I distinctly remember a crushing sense of vulnerability and dread when I interacted with some white males on campus. Although many were the model of respectable genial behavior on the surface, I often sensed a crewing hostility beneath the surface. When I first heard the allegations in this case I wept because it felt like someone had finally revealed the unspoken anxiety I so often felt.”¹⁵³ No apologies were offered after it became clear that the story had been fabricated and that the players were entirely innocent.

Here was an unusual confluence of events that appeared to confirm what conservatives had all along suspected. And this is that the white male is, as Goldberg believes, “the Jew of liberal fascism,” a scapegoat upon which all the manifold evil of the world may be projected. The issue was never whether the players were guilty of the alleged crime. For they had from the outset been judged repositories of a general depravity which might or might not have manifested itself in that particular incident. As an original sin that offered surety for all the specific accusations, this depravity meant that the charges against the players would symbolize the truth even if they did not accurately represent it. This was what the players’ ordeal and ultimate exoneration finally exposed. The Duke incident was a delicious, egg-on-your-face rebuke to the Left’s cognitive elitism, exposing the moralistic and identitarian subtext of what had been sold as an enlightened struggle against prejudice. And liberals could hardly accuse conservatives of exploiting the incident for ideological mileage, given that it was they who first saw fit to endow it with a vast symbolic significance—which simply turned out to be very different from what had been anticipated. Thus were liberals revealed to be no less self-indulgent in their groupthink or willingness to vilify than the ordinary American they despise. Their humanitarianism was exposed as the veneer under which a victim/villain/rescuer narrative subordinates moral and empirical reality to identitarian compulsions and hostilities. Though one professor detected “crewing hostility” underneath the genial surface of some white males, the crewing hostility turned out to be underneath the surface of the anointed themselves. The latter uphold the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, but the incident revealed how this is merely the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of that

¹⁵² Ibid., pg. 15-18.

¹⁵³ Coulter, *Demonic*, pg. 71-72.

disengagement, how liberal sophistication is permeated by a moral hierarchy of identities by comparison with which the actual conduct of individuals is unimportant.

This is, once again, because liberalism is a hero-system rather than the transcendence of all hero-systems. The Duke incident revealed that liberals no less than conservatives inhabit a public order “in which everyone lives,” and see others according to their role in either upholding or undermining it. Liberals would see themselves as self-possessed, disengaged subjects operating in a symbolically neutral environment. But they are no less than conservatives embodied organisms that are neurologically dependent on forms of symbolic sustenance more specific and circumscribed than is indicated by their articulated political morality. An abstract egalitarianism cannot sustain liberals’ identities as the carriers of the buffered distance. And so that egalitarianism must be surreptitiously “filled out” with a richer, more moralistic teleology, the “culture-specific designs of particularist meaning” that both underwrite liberal universalism and also cause that universalism to “misfire” in the way it did at Duke.

The mother of one of the accused Duke players wanted to make a conciliatory gesture and emailed one of the professors involved in denouncing the players. Acknowledging that “[o]ur paths may have been different, but I am sure all of us seek truth and justice,” she requested that he now step forth to acknowledge the fact of the players’ innocence. The professor responded:

LIES! You are just a provocateur [*sic*] on a happy New Years [*sic*] Eve trying to get credit for a scummy bunch of white males. You know you are in search of sympathy [*sic*] for young white guys who beat up a gay man in Georgetown, get drunk in Durham, and lived like “a bunch of farm animals” near campus...umhappy [*sic*] new year to you...and forgive me if your [*sic*] really are, quite sadly, mother of a “farm animal.”¹⁵⁴

The accused students were not only white males but also athletes participating in a violent sport who were furthermore given to bouts of debauchery. As such, they were symbolically anathema to the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity. Just like “farm animals,” they were still wallowing in the “squalor and coarseness” from which that sociability seeks to extricate us, liable to the wild affective oscillations in opposition to which the buffered identity is defined. This was why they could not “get credit” despite their exoneration, because their overall temperament revealed that the civilizing process was incomplete in their case. The ostensible issues were race and sex, but this deficiency was lurking in the background, creating the “negative animal-pole magnetism” that helped shape the Duke professoriate’s impressions of the accused players, who being uncivilized were not entitled to the protection of liberal principles.

¹⁵⁴ Horowitz and Laskin, *One-Party Classroom*, pg. 22.

Liberals mistake their high ideals for an irreducible, primordial phenomenon when these have in fact grown out of the lower, as Nietzsche would say, grown out of the pre-cognitive changes in the overall human make-up chronicled by the mutation counter-narrative. What purport to be enlightened attitudes are not primordial phenomenon, but rather reinterpretations and reconfigurations of the historically inherited impulses it identifies. And this is why the concrete application of liberal principles can never wholly escape liberalism's origins in the civilizing process and the production of a historically contingent identity. These origins may sometimes recede in relation to their outgrowths in liberal theory. But they remain all the same incorporated into that theory's application, which is why these origins will under the right confluence of circumstances obtrude themselves to the fore, inflecting the meaning of the humanitarianism in accordance with extra-humanitarian imperatives and exposing the pragmatic contradiction that was always lurking underneath.

D'Souza is detecting this pragmatic contradiction when he argues in *Illiberal Education* that much which liberals mistake for the lingering effects of historic racism is a new phenomenon of their own making. The conventional wisdom is that racial bigotry is a cultural constant that once operated openly, in the style of Bull Connor, but has since been forced underground, expressing itself only subtly and obliquely in stubborn defiance of new anti-racist norms. Any resurgence of racism, then, "must reflect a relaxation of the strict moral and societal curbs that alone inhibit the visceral bigotry of white Americans." It follows from this diagnosis that campus racial incidents should erupt most frequently in the Deep South, where historical racism is most deep-seated. But surprisingly, they have been more common at Northern Universities, especially in the liberal Northeast.¹⁵⁵ The explanation, D'Souza proffers, is that Northern students are outraged upon finding themselves on the racism suspect lists of inquisitorial academic radicals at the same time as they see often under-qualified minorities receiving preferential treatment in admissions and onward—and in compensation for injuries for which they do not feel themselves responsible. The cumulative result is a "new bigotry" born of experience rather than ignorance. And so these students naturally lose any sympathy for minorities and "feel they occupy the high ground, while everyone else is performing pirouettes and somersaults to avoid the obvious."¹⁵⁶ But with their perceptions being taboo in liberal-dominated college settings, the resentment is forced to fester underground until the dam bursts and some students impulsively engage in rude and crude counter-attacks on the victims' revolution, as happened when some Dartmouth students sacked anti-apartheid

¹⁵⁵ D'Souza, *Illiberal Education*, pg. 126-27.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 240 – 41.

shanties on campus in 1986.¹⁵⁷ Such incidents will be predictably cited as further evidence of entrenched racism. But they are the outcomes that liberalism has itself ordained.

D'Souza does not argue that the offending Dartmouth students were wholly innocent victims of politically correct tyranny. But he does suggest that, to the extent they were villains, this is because the politically correct culture had *inducted* them into that role. The victim/villain/rescuer narrative here not only designates villains, as in the Duke case, but furthermore *creates* them, perpetuating itself by generating conditions under which conservative political views are transmuted into a visceral rage that bears a superficial resemblance to the old racism but in truth comes from another place. The rescuers, to be rescuers, require their villains as much as they require their victims and will, to this end, create symbolic environments within which their hero-systems can be dramatized. By suffocating conservatives in an atmosphere of unremitting political correctness, liberalism provokes the irrational hostilities that can then be adduced to justify political correctness. Whereas liberals allege that conservatives remain surreptitiously racist, conservatives insist that they are being culturally oppressed by the Left's victim/villain/rescuer narratives. But these may be but two sides of the same coin to the extent that liberalism thrives by *re-channeling resentment that was originally directed at the victim/villain/rescuer narrative itself toward the victims*, thereby perpetuating that narrative by conscripting its opponents into its service.

This may sound hopelessly conspiratorial. But liberals have no difficulty believing that temperamentally bellicose neoconservatives will seek to *make* new enemies to replace those which the passage of history has eliminated and, in the process, generate the very dangers of which they warned. And D'Souza's intuition is that an analogous dynamic transpires on the Left. This is not a conspiracy, but something that follows from a post-epistemological interpretation of the New Enlightenment. Ideology is not just a set of beliefs about how the world works and should work, but the organismic *project* of engendering the conditions under which a hero-system can be validated and vindicated. And this may mean creating victims and villains when none readily offer themselves. Liberals oppose racism, not only as an unfair impediment to other people's strategic action, but in expression of their own hero-systems, and therefore *require* the existence of racism or some racism-substitute as a target. Liberals may not see themselves as working in this way, of course. But as I have already argued, consciousness intention is in no way dispositive under the New Enlightenment. At issue is not any self-conscious cynicism but, as Nietzsche says, a "subtlety of discernment higher than all reason," a basic drive to maintain the conditions

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pg. 19.

under which one's hero-system has a suitable venue. Conservative claims of cultural oppression are reactions to just this.

6. Female Grade-School Teachers from Brown or Swarthmore

Sommers observes that many progressive educators dismiss traditional character education as "moralizing" and "indoctrination" and insist that it is "inappropriate for a teacher to encourage students, however subtly or indirectly, to adopt the values of the teacher or the community."¹⁵⁸ These traditional approaches are condemned as an effort to transform children into obedient workers beguiled by an unjust order where wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of the few, just as the Pledge of Allegiance is now equated with fascistic oaths to the fatherland.¹⁵⁹ But this relativism has not yielded the freedom it promises. For Sommers believes that the moral education of yesteryear has simply been replaced by the new conformism of therapism, which has proven to be no less coercive. Though advanced in the name of the child's moral and psychological development, this new dispensation is in fact "far more invasive of the child's privacy and far more insidious in its effects on the child's autonomy than the directive moral education that was once the norm in every school."¹⁶⁰ Conservatives believe that "progressive education" is merely the vehicle through which impressionable minds are indoctrinated and molded into the liberal dispensation under the deceptive veneer of tolerance, open-mindedness, critical thinking, and other ostensibly benign values. As we saw in an earlier chapter, Goldberg warns that "[t]he quintessential liberal fascist isn't an SS storm trooper" but rather "a female grade-school teacher with an education degree from Brown or Swarthmore." In a similar vein, David Limbaugh warns parents that the National Education Association has resolved that schools become "ethics clinics whose purpose is to provide individualized psycho-social treatment for the student, and teachers must become psycho-social therapists"¹⁶¹ Here as elsewhere, conservative claimants of cultural oppression see symmetry where liberals see asymmetry. Their moral traditionalism has simply been replaced by a new regime that conceals its ideology in the mantle of professionalism, the cover under which liberalism molds people to its own specifications.

While progressive educators may acknowledge that they seek to inculcate a specific set of values, they will disagree with conservatives that these values are in any way imperious or coercive. Lakoff

¹⁵⁸ Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000), pg. 193.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., pg. 203.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pg. 212.

¹⁶¹ David Limbaugh, *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2004), pg. 86.

explains that the evils addressed by Nurturant Parent morality are “lack of social responsibility, selfishness, self-righteousness, narrow-mindedness, inability to experience pleasure, aesthetic insensitivity, lack of curiosity, uncommunicativeness, dishonesty, insensitivity to feelings, inconsiderateness, uncooperativeness, meanness, self-centeredness, and lack of self-respect.”¹⁶² And so its values do indeed seem more ecumenical—less “directive” as Sommers says—than the moralistic character education supported by conservatives. After all, there would seem to be a big difference between morally excoriating homosexuality and morally excoriating “narrow-mindedness.” Students are being sensitized, not to some supra-personal “Moral Order” with its illusory hierarchies, but to the concrete “experiential” realities around them, which serve to anchor progressive values in bona fide human flourishing. Conservative moralism seeks to uphold God, Country, and Family. But the liberal virtues would seem to consist in meta-values whose appeal does not rest on any such parochial allegiances.

However, conservatives suspect that it is precisely by virtue of this benevolent, all-purpose amorphousness that Nurturant Parent morality permits and indeed invites endless manipulateness and intrusiveness cloaked in the mantle of respect for the individual’s highest potentialities—in whose realization the individual can always be discovered deficient by the anointed. Just when will someone have displayed a morally adequate level of curiosity? How broad-minded must we be and with respect to which issues? The ecumenical open-endedness of liberal values just means that they can always be interpreted in accordance with specific imperatives that need never be openly announced, because having been disguised in unobjectionable abstractions. How indoctrinating, conservatives ask, is the daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance or the Boy Scout Oath, or even the display of the Ten Commandments for that matter, by comparison with the individualized psycho-social treatment envisioned by the National Education Association? Does this individualization truly promote any kind of individualism, or does it simply augment the state’s opportunities for exercising coercive influence? As we will now see, the totalitarianism that conservatives detect in progressive education is liberalism’s attempt to inculcate the properly ordered sociability of the buffered identity under the banner of liberation and awareness, the innocently thin terms that conceal the true scope of the transformative agenda that we have again and again observed at work.

This transformative agenda is why one religious conservative could complain that the values clarification education that purports to liberate student to explore their own values in fact “threatens to

¹⁶² Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, pg. 127.

imprison” students “within walls of egoistic subjectivity, to drown them in a flood of feeling.”¹⁶³ As with all conservative claims of cultural oppression, this apprehension reflects an under-theorized understanding mutation counter-narrative. While the buffered identity cannot be reduced to mere “egoistic subjectivity,” the sense that students are being imprisoned or drowned by an alien force reflects this critics’ sense that these educators are seeking to impose that identity on students’ default porousness. Liberals will insist that values clarification programs seek to inculcate critical thinking, not specific beliefs. But the buffered identity is not a set of beliefs that might be inculcated to the exclusion of others, but a structure of reflexivity—a way of believing—that can be instilled without reference to any beliefs whatsoever, which is what this conservative means by a “flood of feeling,” a symbol for the disengaged innerness of the buffered self. Hence David Limbaugh’s worries that the meditation and relaxation techniques now being promoted among schoolchildren are “mind-altering techniques” whose purpose is to send “a subtle message that children can find an ultimate source of wisdom (and goodness) within themselves.” They are being told that “[j]ust by tapping on that inner reservoir, they’ll automatically begin to behave better and achieve greater fulfillment.”¹⁶⁴ Limbaugh frames his objections within an epistemological framework—as concerning a “subtle message.” But that subtlety actually refers to the fact that these techniques are *generating* the “inner reservoir” by inculcating the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. The “subtle message” discerned by Limbaugh is subtle precisely because it is being cultivated at the level of “nonexplicit engagement with the world,” the level of experience that liberal rationalism cannot acknowledge.

The N.E.A. Proceedings in 1900, relates Hofstadter, announced that rather than “trying to fit the boy into the system,” the goal of education would now be “to adjust the system to the boy.” And adjusting the system to the boy does indeed seem less authoritarian than trying to fit the boy into the system. But whereas the latter does not presume intimate knowledge of the boy, but only of the system, the former imputes the educator with precisely this knowledge, inviting a presumptuousness and intrusiveness unknown under the former dispensation. These are now well-disguised in the benevolent solicitude of therapism. But the extent of the imperiousness was more salient in the original *non-secular* categories through which progressive education first announced its mission. For the N.E.A. believed that the child’s relationship to his teacher should mirror Lazarus’s relationship to Christ. Just like Christ, the teacher would release the child “from shrouds and deathly sacraments,” thereby “turning him loose to grow.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Qt. in James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books 1991), pg. 205.

¹⁶⁴ Limbaug, *Persecution*, pg. 80.

¹⁶⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), pg. 364.

Today's teacher-therapists may no longer compare themselves with Christ. But Goldberg's female grade-school teacher with education degrees from Brown or Swarthmore arrogate the same prerogatives when they presume to rescue their students from blindness, insensitivity, and the like. The religious lingo has been dispensed with, not because we are now more secular, but because the religious has been *compressed* into the secular, where it works itself out under the pretense that the goal is merely to help children see things clearly and "grow."

These announced goals disguise a more robust agenda, however, which conservatives sense intuitively. Limbaugh notes that children are now being taught about religion by being forced to reenact Islamic rituals like praying to Allah. The purpose of the "Islam simulation materials" was not simply to teach about the tenets of Islam, as would not be inappropriate, but to force students "to pretend they were Muslims, praying in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, and to chant 'praise to Allah, Lord of Creation.'"¹⁶⁶ The progressive will respond that the purpose of such simulations is not to proselytize students to any particular religious creed but, on the contrary, to provide them with an opportunity to broaden their horizons, to "step out of their own shoes" as it were in order to better cultivate the virtues of tolerance, openness to change, and so forth—to which immersion in Islam is only a means. However, the reflectiveness that is being urged upon these students is *structured*, always inflected by certain ideals that outstrip the official pedagogical agenda. The purpose of these exercises may not be to inculcate Islam, but this is only because they seek to is to transform religion into an expressive need, and thereby instill the well-adjusted expressive moderation of the buffered identity, the kind of identity that can look upon "world religions" with a detachment that was unavailable to these religions' historical adherents. The goal of the exercises was not to transform Christians into Muslims. But it was to transform Christians into "individuals" who happen to entertain a particular "conception of the good" and therefore do not *live* that conception, because their identities are foremost defined by the disengagement of the buffered self.

What conservatives decry as the invasiveness of progressive education is unintelligible on the subtraction account, for which whatever coercion liberalism may employ operates to liberate human nature from the various illusions and confining horizons that heretofore impeded it—like narrow religious dogmatism in the case at hand. But on the mutation counter-narrative, that liberation involves the inculcation of a particular affective-instinctual structure, an attempt to internalize the individual's horizon of meaning in contravention of human agency's default setting. Progressive educators understand

¹⁶⁶ Limbaugh, *Persecution*, pg. 76, 83.

themselves as inculcating “awareness,” which sounds like a “neutral” ideal. But this ideal refers us, not to any abstract, culturally-denuded “openness”—whatever this would mean—but to the buffered distance. To be “aware” is to be aware *of* one’s distance from a barbarian past of less fortunate peoples, to be aware of the spiritual and secular as having been compressed into one another, and therefore to endorse policies, attitudes, and preferences which bespeak that compression. While awareness ostensibly refers to a stance toward the world, the subtext of the latter is a stance *toward oneself*, a commitment to the disciplines and repressions of buffered identity and its properly ordered sociability. If progressive educators cannot recognize this imperiousness, this is because the buffered identity has, *in their case*, receded into the invisible, taken-for granted background of things, as they have not for conservatives. The manipulation that the latter discern in progressive education is precisely what is to be expected of a hero-system that mistakes itself for the transcendence of all hero-systems, a hero-system whose “silent curriculum” disguises an attempt to promote a specific identity and ideal of human agency under the cover of generic liberation and enlightenment.

Sommers relates the case of an “equity educator” who throughout the school year inculcated the virtues of sex-role reversal in her students and then expressed astonishment that they should have on their own initiative elected to swap sex-roles in their traditional end-of-the-year class play. What she mistook for their initiative was of course the predictable result of the indoctrination she had been meting out over the entire year. “Such self-deception,” writes Sommers “is common among equity educators.” It “never seems to occur to them that they are tampering with children’s individuality or intruding on their privacy.”¹⁶⁷ If Sommers’s equity educator could have so thoroughly deceived herself here, this is because her indoctrination proceeded *under the auspices of the subtraction account*. For the latter allowed her to interpret her “tampering” as nothing more sinister than an effort to expose students to alternative perspectives and thereby eliminate the confining horizons that obstruct true individuality. But she and other progressive educators overlook that they are providing, not only intellectual exercises, but also forms of *training*, the purpose of which is to discipline students away from the “peculiarly human emotions,” like the teleological conviction that people are defined by their biological sex. Understanding themselves within the epistemological framework, liberals reduce the meaning of “indoctrination” to the coercion of specific avowals. And since they refrain from any such coercion, they do not see themselves as engaged in indoctrination. But the “silent curriculum” of liberalism is, as Macedo observes, gentle, proceeding not through direct indoctrination but by generating a social context in which liberal attitudes

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., pg. 78.

will seem natural and inevitable, in which those attitudes are built into the very structure of human reflexivity, as the unspoken background of all subsequent political theorizing.

This equity-educator succeeded in creating such an atmosphere, and this the reason why progressive education strikes conservatives as uniquely nefarious. Students can recognize right moralism for what it is and either accept or resist it. But no such defenses are available against the solicitude of the NEA's psycho-social therapists who seek, not to instill discrete, identifiable convictions like love of country or the work ethic, but to commune with the child as a whole in the name of endlessly malleable ideals like self-awareness or the human potential. The strictness of Strict Father morality is precisely what renders that morality definable and identifiable, a mere coefficient of adversity in relation to which people can position themselves as they will. By contrast, liberal nurturance culminates in a situation in which the agent may be unable to readily distinguish his will from the external forces that are acting upon it, because to oppose these is also to place oneself in opposition to open-mindedness, awareness, sensitivity, curiosity, and so on. And this no one wishes to do, because this is to become discredited as a genuine agent. Whereas those who transgress against the "Moral Order" of conservatives will be labeled as having done just that, those who transgress against liberalism's order of mutual benefit will find their transgression *internalized*, described, not as a conflict *between* individual and society, but as a deficiency *within* the individual that compromises his basic competence as a human agent, placing him outside the buffered distance as a mass of unruly impulses that have yet to be reformed.

Charles Kors reports that Northwestern University hired "Self-Evaluation Consultants" to help carry out its New Student Week in 1989, where it was explained to incoming freshmen that while they were not at fault for the "customs and habits of thought" they inherited from their parents and communities, they must now remake their lives, ridding themselves of "the ugliness, the meanness,...[the] narrowness and [the] tribalism."¹⁶⁸ And at Montclair State University, residential advisors attending sensitivity training sessions were issued a "permission slip" announcing that they have permission to be "imperfect with regards to homophobia and heterosexism." Given the homophobic/heterosexist culture into which they had been born, any ignorance and misunderstanding were excusable so long as they were "struggling to change my false/inaccurate beliefs or oppressive attitudes [and] learning what I can do to make a difference."¹⁶⁹ The forbearance and understanding extended by these diversity trainers is fully consistent with the vision of the anointed. As we observed with Sowell, this vision holds that the

¹⁶⁸ Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), pg. 221.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 229.

benighted must be afforded an opportunity “to be made ‘aware,’ to have their ‘consciousness raised,’” in the “wistful hope” that they will “grow.” And this is because whereas traditional moralism can condemn moral failure without circumlocution, the vision of the anointed must, given its presumptions to sociological sophistication, condemn moral failure *qua* cognitive failure. Given that the elites’ hero-system is predicated on their insight into a social causality of which others are oblivious, they cannot hold others responsible for their prejudices in any straightforward causal sense, and can only insist that they assume responsibility for their condition.

But as Sowell also observes, those who continue to resist the guidance of the anointed must have their “mean-spiritedness” fought and their real motivations exposed. And indeed, Kors reports that in most of these sensitivity programs students who step forward to confess their bigoted impulses are adulated, celebrated for their courage and newfound enlightenment while those who refuse are condemned as fascists and racists deserving of punishment.¹⁷⁰ One might think that any refusal to struggle and overcome moral imperfection should be just as excusable as the original imperfection, for both are equally the consequence of unchosen social forces, whose existence the anointed acknowledge. Yet it is not excused. And therein lies the liberal contradiction. The Left charges opponents of homosexuality with “homophobia,” thereby medicalizing their worldviews as the pathology of those given to “bare animus.” But it does not then indulge homophobes with the clinical detachment that is appropriate to, say, agoraphobes. That detachment may be intimated at the outset—e.g., the diversity’s trainer’s permission slips. But it soon enough reveals itself as the deceptive and self-deceptive histrionic mimicry of the genuine article, for it is soon enough replaced by moralistic intensity. And this is because the detachment was ultimately expressive of the buffered identity, of a hero-system the benefit of whose principles may be withheld from those who fail to uphold it. Once again, the buffered identity cannot take its naturalism to its logical conclusion. And the reason is, once again, that naturalism is permeated by moralism, by an original spiritual vision. For it is this moralism that is being unleashed against those who resist the naturalism, who refuse to see themselves as the products of the irrational socialization that liberals have in their superior awareness identified.

Meta-censorious is not, as Dalrymple suggests, a mere redirection of traditional censoriousness onto novel targets, but, as would be expected on the mutation counter-narrative, the sublimation, intellectualization, and etherealization of that original censoriousness. Having compressed their moralism into their naturalism, liberals are positioned to blur the line between cognitive demands and moral ones.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., pg. 215.

And this endows liberals' censoriousness with a special power. Those who would defy the moralism of the right will be condemned for sinful arrogance. But those who would defy the moralism of the Left will find themselves stripped of basic cognitive competence, helpless before the admonitions of liberals. What is one to say before those who understand themselves as embodying, not some set of substantive moral dogmas, but "awareness" as such, who judge whatever opinions are laid before them, not as simply right or wrong, but as either aware or unaware? Meta-censoriousness is, as Sartre would say, a look that cannot be looked at, a disembodied superciliousness that, being "sublimely confident" as Goldberg would say, presents its engagement as disengagement and so assaults through its very detachment. The censoriousness of the Right is a comparatively primitive technology, a hard stone wall which can in principle be resisted. By contrast, the meta-censoriousness of liberals is a more sophisticated instrument, a pool of quicksand into which one risks sinking deeper and deeper with every act of protest. For liberals' claims to higher consciousness provokes the very hostility that then seems to validate those claims socially. "Political correctness" is thus a self-fulfilling prophesy, a vision that creates its own truth, as conservatives who resent liberalism's disciplinary impulses are driven further and further into the reactionary positions that would appear to justify those impulses. The censoriousness of the Right is capable of no such insidiousness.

Chapter Nine

The Secular Counter-Church of Liberalism

The traditional conservative critique of “judicial activism” holds that the enumerated constitutional protections of individual freedoms reflect America’s particular historical experience at the founding and the incomplete wisdom it furnished. Liberal courts stand accused of disregarding this wisdom and experience by construing what were understood to be relatively specific protections against relatively specific governmental transgressions as imperfect instantiations of abstract moral ideals like autonomy and equality. In this way, liberal judges insert their personal philosophical preferences into the Constitution, inventing new rights and principles that would have been philosophically and culturally foreign to those who framed and ratified the relevant constitutional provisions, as well as to contemporary majorities, who have not opted to amend the Constitution legislatively in the manner that the liberal activist judge amends it judicially.

But this complaint assumes a somewhat different flavor when advanced as a conservative claim of cultural oppression. In this context, the liberal judge stands accused of ignoring the original understanding of the Constitution, not simply to satisfy his personal philosophical leanings, but to propagate a parochial cultural vision. “Judicial activism” is undemocratic, not only in substituting the will of a few judges for that of the majority, but also in entrenching the parochial cultural sensibilities of one social class, the liberal elites, at the expense of the voiceless ordinary American. Bork describes the Supreme Court as an institution “whose pronouncements are significantly guided not by the historical meaning of the Constitution but by the values of the class that is dominant in the culture.”¹ Having become colonized by what Bork calls the “parochial morality of an arrogant intellectual class,”² the courts surreptitiously elevate what is a specific cultural ethos into a hegemonic narrative about the meaning of American ideals, all under the guise of thoughtfulness, enlightenment, progress, and so forth. Much as *Lochner* era jurisprudence was driven by the economic interests of the then-dominant capitalist class, so contemporary liberal jurisprudence is driven by the cultural interests of the now-dominant verbal class, the anointed or liberal elites.

We have already investigated this charge in a number of contexts. There was, for example, Justice Scalia’s argument that *Romer v. Evans* reflected “Templar” sensibilities—the “law-school view of what

¹ Robert H. Bork, *Slouching toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Regan Books, 2003), pg. 149.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 321.

'prejudices' must be stamped out." And as we also saw, Justice Scalia believed that the Court's decision in *U.S. v Virginia* requiring the Virginia Military Institute to admit women reflected hostility to "manly honor." There was also Greenberg's critique of *Texas v. Johnson*, upholding the First Amendment right to burn the American flag, which he argued reflected "an isolating intellectualism cut off from a sense of reverence, and so from the historical memory and heroic imagination that determines the fate of any nation." In all these cases, the underlying intuition is that what liberals hold out as detached ratiocination gives disguised expression to something more primitive and visceral, the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. The Court was upholding, not only certain abstract ideals, but also a particular understanding of human agency, of the "overall human make-up" as Elias would say. And it is this which explains why the pivotal issues were conceptualized as they were.

I will now continue this line of analysis by examining the role played by the concept of religious neutrality in the Supreme Court's Establishment Clause jurisprudence. Goldberg, we noted earlier, alleges that a secularist group like People for the American Way "serves as a tireless mason in the construction of the wall between church and state, shrinking the public space for traditional religion and building the foundations of a secular counter-church of liberalism." As we saw, conservatives can believe this because they see the "secular," not as a neutral sphere wherein religious questions are benignly put out of play, but rather as religion's *competitor*. The secular is a kind of religion in its own right, albeit one that will not announce itself as such. And so what liberals call religious neutrality is in truth just an ideological vehicle through which liberals attempt to impose their counter-religion.

On the other hand, liberals dismiss this argument as disingenuous and contrived, believing it to be an ideological rationalization for religious conservatives' theocratic impulses, which are advanced under the pretense of resistance to a secular liberal counter-religion. Religious conservatives would accuse liberals of "surreptitious sectarianism," arguing that they promote some covert secular analogue of religious faith. But as secular liberals see, it, the real ploy lies in this very accusation, which is a ruse through which religious conservatives advance their "surreptitious imperiousness." Seeking to foist their personal theological predilections upon the wider society, religious conservatives must find a way to keep the true upholders of religious neutrality on the defensive, so that they may then call upon them to compensate for some imaginary injury inflicted upon traditional religion. *This* is why they dismiss liberal neutrality as bogus.

If my argument thus far is correct, then this controversy can no less than all the others we have surveyed be viewed as a clash of cosmological orientations. What liberals understand as religious neutrality is an expression of the buffered identity as understood within the subtraction account of

modernity and secularity, just as conservatives' rejection of that neutrality expresses the agency structure of porous selves with their under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative. If conservatives see anti-religious hostility where liberals see religious neutrality, this is because the hostility transpires at the level of nonexplicit engagement with the world, not in any officially professed positions, but in the ordinarily hidden and disavowed layers of social meaning against the backdrop of which liberal neutrality is announced. The "blind spots" of liberals must, in this case as in the others, originate in liberalism's failure to take its naturalism to its logical conclusion and recognize the operation of a hero-system. For it is this that would reveal the existence of *normatively relevant symmetries* between liberalism and what liberals see as conservatives' authoritarian dispositions—between what secular liberals call religious neutrality and what they judge to be the incipiently theocratic impulses of those who reject that neutrality as fraudulent. As we will now see, the intractability that has marked the religious neutrality problem reflects neither personal obstinacy nor intellectual complexity, but a difference in cosmological orientation, in the overall human make-up, which is what the arguments express conceptually.

I will introduce our problem in Sections 1 and 2 by explaining how the religious neutrality controversy has been marked by a recurring logical structure that may be discovered across a range of seemingly discrete controversies, such as school prayer, public religious displays, and textbook content. Specifically, we will seek to better understand why conservative allegations about the fraudulence of liberal neutrality have always struck liberals as transparently disingenuous gambits to procure special advantages for religion under the cover of a benign demand for equal respect. Beginning in Section 3, I will explain how this liberal incredulity is problematized by the mutation counter-narrative. Here as elsewhere, conservative claims of cultural oppression are not contrived, because the meaning of religious neutrality will be processed differently according to where one stands along the modern/pre-modern continuum. The upshot, we will see, is that there is no religiously neutral vantage point on religious neutrality because what qualifies as religious neutrality is a function of cosmological orientation and because the mutation counter-narrative reveals cosmological orientation is to be a fundamentally religious stance.

1. Truly to be Neutral

In 1962, the Supreme Court in *Engel v. Vitale* held unconstitutional a New York school district's policy of requiring students to commence the school day by reciting a prayer composed by the state's Board of Regents. That prayer went "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we

beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country. Amen.”³ Only a year later, in 1963, in *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, the Court would make clear that the constitutional problem went beyond the state-composed status of that prayer. For it would now hold unconstitutional two laws requiring that public schools initiate the school day with religious exercises, including the recital of the Lord’s Prayer and the reading of Bible verses, without comment, by teachers or select students. Both schools allowed students to be excused from the exercises with the written permission of their parents. Nevertheless, the Court determined that the Constitution strictly prohibited state actions whose purpose or effect was “to aid or oppose, to advance or retard” religion, and aiding and advancing religion was precisely what these exercises were doing. As regards the individual’s relationship to his religion, “the State is firmly committed to a position of neutrality.”⁴

Writing as the lone dissenter, Justice Stewart objected that the Court’s reasoning swept too broadly, because the constitutionality of the exercises at issue depended on the precise manner in which they were implemented, as to which the record was incomplete. For “religious exercises are not constitutionally invalid,” Justice Stewart argued, “if they simply reflect differences which exist in the society from which the school draws its pupils.”⁵ Thus, there would be no constitutional problem if these exercises were offered as merely one of several alternative activities in which students could choose to participate.⁶ Prayer would then be like an elective course rather than part of the core curriculum, and the state would just be recognizing already extant religious sentiments, not attempting to inculcate new ones. Other non-religious activities being available options, the state would not be corralling students into the exercises, and so would not be displaying unconstitutional favoritism toward religion. The state does not place its imprimatur of approval upon baseball when it offers students the choice of playing baseball, basketball, or football. Why then, Justice Stewart’s question seems to be, should it be construed as placing its imprimatur of approval upon religion when it offers them a choice between praying and engaging in a secular alternative? To institute prayer thusly would be to support religion only in the constitutionally unobjectionable sense of “the withholding of state hostility.” The school’s sponsorship of organized prayer would constitute “a simple acknowledgment on the part of secular authorities that the Constitution does not require extirpation of all expression of religious belief.”⁷

³ *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421, 422 (U.S. 1962).

⁴ *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 226 (U.S. 1963)

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 317-18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 318.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 318.

This was to imply that the Court was itself guilty of participating in this extirpation. And indeed, Justice Stewart suggested that it had recreated the very problem it was supposedly redressing:

For a compulsory state educational system so structures a child's life that if religious exercises are held to be an impermissible activity in schools, religion is placed at an artificial and state-created disadvantage. Viewed in this light, permission of such exercises for those who want them is necessary if the schools are truly to be neutral in the matter of religion. And a refusal to permit religious exercises thus is seen, not as the realization of state neutrality, but rather as the establishment of a religion of secularism, or at the least, as government support of the beliefs of those who think that religious exercises should be conducted only in private.⁸

This may sound temperate and level-headed. But Justice Stewart's essential logic—that to ignore religion is already to oppose it—strikes liberals as most audacious. In the case of people, the sense that inattention to someone bespeaks positive hostility might be considered the sign of an inflated narcissism. Yet in the case of religion, Justice Stewart asks us to accept this logic as genuine, as opposed to false or superficial, neutrality. But this, it seems to liberals, is already to be less than neutral with respect to religion. The majority readily acknowledged that establishing a “religion of secularism” would be unconstitutional. But this, it insisted, would have to involve “affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion.”⁹ And how can the mere cessation of school-sponsored prayer constitute affirmative opposition or hostility? The Court was not requiring that the teachers of Abington Township begin the school day by questioning the existence of God or reciting the evils of religion, but merely that they refrain from inviting their students to pray. How can there be affirmative hostility toward religion when there is no *act* through which any such hostility could be expressed? The Court was commanding nothing other than silence with respect to religion. And silence, a non-occurrence, does not qualify as affirmative opposition to anything at all. These points are not complicated. Why then, liberals wonder, are so many religious conservatives either unwilling or unable to accept them when they carry on about the insidious presence of some secular counter-religion in the public schools?

Though not a conservative or a proponent of school prayer, Stephen Carter articulates the core of the conservative intuition:

After all, if the knowledge that many of one's classmates are praying during the moment of silence produces pressure to pray..., then surely the knowledge that many of one's classmates are *not* praying as the school day opens will produce pressure *not* to pray. There is, in short, no neutral position.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., pg. 313.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 225.

¹⁰ Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), pg. 191.

But of course, students are *not* doing, and know each other *not* to be doing, a whole host of activities, from riding their bicycles to playing video games to ordering pizza. Yet we would not say that the school is impliedly denigrating these activities merely by refusing to facilitate them during school hours. These activities have been judged “out of place” and nothing more. Why, then, are religious conservatives unprepared to accept that nothing more nefarious than this is being implied as to religion? Why should the “not” carry a different significance in the religion context? The law of the excluded middle cannot make conservatives’ case for them, because the question is why indifference to religion should be so readily interpreted as hostility toward it. While Justice Stewart sees himself as issuing a modest plea for some minimal acknowledgment of religion’s importance in the lives of students, he does not explain how a principle that equates inaction with hostility admits of any limitation. His argument is that public schools “structure” the lives of students in such a way as to transform indifference into hostility. But he does not explain why this should be. Could atheistic parents not also complain that the school day “structures” their children’s lives to the point that the state must assist in the atheistic upbringing of their children through voluntary readings of Richard Dawkins if it is “truly to be neutral in the matter of religion”? Yet atheists restrain themselves from making any such demands. Is it too much to ask that religious believers follow suit?

Rejecting the suggestion that public schools could eliminate the problem of religious sectarianism by simply eliminating all religious instruction, New York’s Bishop Hughes argued in 1840 that

To make an infidel, what is it necessary to do? Cage him up in a room, give him a secular education from the age of five years to twenty-one, and I ask you what will he come out, if not an infidel?... They say that their instruction is not sectarianism: but it is; and of what kind? The sectarianism of infidelity in its every feature.¹¹

Justice Stewart is concerned to avert a “religion of secularism” rather than a “sectarianism of infidelity.” But are these not one and the same thing in the end, liberals ask? Whereas Bishop Hughes could express his theological prejudices without inhibition, today’s religious conservatives must disguise theirs in worries about secularist hegemony. But the disguise seems rather thin. As Bishop Hughes’s argument reveals, the extent to which educational regimentation artificially impedes religious practice cannot be evaluated in disregard of the theological premises of the religious practices being impacted. To go down this path, then, is to begin translating theology into law, however the argument is couched. And this is why liberals feel they can concede nothing to religious conservatives. For what assurance do they have, liberals ask, that these conservatives will not, having received the finger, then go on to demand the whole

¹¹ Qt in Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pg. 69.

hand? If Justice Stewart does not *want* neutrality, then that is of course another matter. But then he should be straightforward about it, rather than disguising his commitment to privileging religion in claims about what is required if the state is “truly to be neutral in the matter of religion.”

The dynamics of *Schempp* anticipated a pattern that would be again and again repeated in subsequent Establishment Clause cases. The charge that judicial decisions and other state actions that purport to be religiously neutral or indifferent carry an unacknowledged anti-religious or counter-religious valence would often recur in later years, usually in the dissenting opinions of conservative justices. In *Lee v. Weisman*, for example, the Supreme Court held unconstitutional a non-sectarian middle school graduation benediction on the grounds that it would be psychologically coercive to the adolescents in attendance. None were required to participate. But given adolescents’ well-known susceptibility to peer pressure, the coercion was all the same real. Dissenting, Justice Scalia argued that that this one-sided concern for the plaintiff’s feelings did violence to the essential nature of religion:

The reader has been told much in this case about the personal interest of Mr. Weisman and his daughter, and very little about the personal interests on the other side. They are not inconsequential. Church and state would not be such a difficult subject if religion were, as the Court apparently thinks it to be, some purely personal avocation that can be indulged entirely in secret, like pornography, in the privacy of one's room. For most believers it is not that, and has never been. Religious men and women of almost all denominations have felt it necessary to acknowledge and beseech the blessing of God as a people, and not just as individuals, because they believe in the "protection of divine Providence," as the Declaration of Independence put it, not just for individuals but for societies....¹²

As we saw in the last chapter, Sowell accuses that the vision of the anointed “arbitrarily singles out some particular kind of individual or group to be made sacred and leaves others to be sacrificed on the altar of this sacredness.” And Justice Scalia is suggesting that the Court was exhibiting precisely this tendency. It could have attached such significance to the possible psychological coercion of one student while ignoring the consequences of this solicitude for the other affected parties only because it first cast religion as a purely private affair. And it is this false picture, Justice Scalia is suggesting, that permitted the Court to artificially simplify the stakes, to misrepresent what is a zero-sum game as a non-zero-sum one and so conceal the true costs of its decision. The Court could claim non-hostility toward religion, but this was only by first doing violence to its nature, by relegating religion to a status akin to pornography. This understanding of what religion *is* was hardly neutral, and it is this sleight-of-hand that liberal secularists refuse to acknowledge.

¹² *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 645 (U.S. 1992) (Scalia, J., dissenting).

But for liberals, this is no less than Justice Stewart's argument an exercise in conceptual obfuscation. Justice Scalia accuses the Court of relegating religion to the status of pornography, but his argument rests on an equivocation of the legal and spatial senses of the public/private distinction. That the public schools may not sponsor graduation prayers does not in any way condemn religious believers to undertake their activities in solitude, or even away from the public eye. It is, after all, a basic axiom of the First Amendment that religious groups may use public space on the same terms as non-religious ones.¹³ Like Justice Stewart in *Schempp*, Justice Scalia seems prepared to reach for any argument in an effort to deceptively characterize a mere failure to favor as an act of aggression.

And this is not a principle which anyone would be prepared to take to its logical conclusion. Justice Stewart describes a "refusal to permit religious exercises" as the establishment of a religion of secularism. But it would follow from this that school districts should be constitutionally *required* to sponsor some form of elective religious activity, in the absence of which this secular counter-religion will have been established. If this "refusal" qualifies as hostility toward religion when issued by the Supreme Court, then should it not signify the same when issued by local school boards? Yet we can be reasonably confident that most conservatives will not go this far. And the fact that they will not take their rhetoric to its logical conclusion suggests to liberals that their talk of a "religion of secularism" and the "extirpation of all expression of religious belief" is a rhetorical ruse that conservatives themselves do not truly believe. It is not a principled challenge to some misapplication of the neutrality principle, but rather a last-ditch effort to sabotage the principle itself.

Of course, someone like Justice Scalia also rejects religious neutrality as a constitutional principle, dismissing neutrality as between religion and non-religion—as opposed to neutrality between religions—as an illegitimate judicial artifice that is anathema to longstanding constitutional traditions. But while conservative claimants of cultural oppression do indeed make this argument, they are not satisfied letting their case rest with it, and furthermore insist that *ostensibly descriptive claims concerning what qualifies as hostility toward religion in fact express normative commitments, like that very hostility, that will not be openly acknowledged*. The problem is not simply that liberal jurists ignore longstanding traditions that permit some measure of non-coercive state favoritism toward religion, but that they have in repudiating these traditions replaced that favoritism not with neutrality but with a hostility that operates under the cover of neutrality. In this way do the liberal elites vent their broader cultural aversion toward religion, using disavowed layers of social meaning, like the relegation of religion to the status of pornography, in

¹³ See *Good News Club v. Milford Central School*, 533 U. S. 98 (U.S. 2001).

order to communicate a message that they will not openly acknowledge. As liberals see it, however, this invisible message is strictly a figment of the conservative imagination, and conservatives have said nothing that would prove otherwise.

* * *

Justice Stewart was invoking the “religion of secularism” in a loose, ill-defined sense, simply to suggest that secularism can become as hegemonic or intolerant as traditional religion has sometimes been. But the notion of a secular religiosity has been more fully elaborated in the lower courts, where plaintiffs, and in one case a federal district judge, have argued that local public school curriculums were advancing a secular counter-religion, often labeled “secular humanism,” whose covert objective is to undermine traditional theism. In *Smith v. Board of Commissioners of Mobile County*, a group of citizens intervened in an ongoing school prayer case, arguing that any injunction against school prayer also enjoin the school’s use of ideologically slanted textbooks promoting “the religions of secularism, humanism, evolution, materialism, agnosticism, atheism and others.”¹⁴ The school’s curriculum, they argued, “unconstitutionally advanced the religion of humanism, unconstitutionally inhibited Christianity, [and] systematically excluded history of the contributions of Christianity to the American way of life...”¹⁵

District Judge Hand was sympathetic to these grievances. After his initial ruling that the Supreme Court had erred in applying the Establishment Clause to the states was overturned by the Court of Appeals, he turned to the new duties which had now been thrust upon him:

The religions of atheism, materialism, agnosticism, communism and socialism have escaped the scrutiny of the courts throughout the years, and make no mistake these are to the believers religions; they are ardently adhered to and quantitatively advanced in the teachings and literature that is presented to the fertile minds of the students in the various school systems. If the courts are to involve themselves in the proscription of religious activities in the schools, then it appears to this Court that we are going to have to involve ourselves in a whole host of areas, such as censoring, that we have heretofore ignored or overlooked.¹⁶

Faced with no choice but to apply the Establishment Clause to the states, Judge Hand turned the principle of religious neutrality back against its usual secular defenders. After what appears to have been an extended examination of the nature of religion, secular humanism’s origins in the philosophy of John Dewey, and how that philosophy has insinuated itself into the educational system, Judge Hand issued an injunction, later vacated on appeal, proscribing the classroom use of forty-four home economics and

¹⁴ *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 655 F. Supp 939, 942 (S.D. Ala. 1987).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 946.

¹⁶ *Qtd. Smith v. Board of Sch. Commr’s*, 827 F.2d 684, 688 (11th Cir. Ala. 1987).

history textbooks, which he judged were unconstitutionally advancing the religion of secular humanism. This was a creed that, as one expert witness explained, “holds that we have no reason to believe in a creator, that the world is self existing, that there is no transcendent power at work in the world” and, correlatively, that “we should not turn to traditional religion for wisdom” but instead “develop a new ethics and a new method of moral order founded upon the teachings of modern naturalism and physical science.”¹⁷ In its attempt to hijack the prestige of natural science for its own uses, secular humanism had taken science beyond its proper bounds as a specialized mode of inquiry, elevating it into a comprehensive worldview that is hostile to theism. The recurring message of the offending textbooks was the common, secular humanist “faith assumption” that “self-actualization is the goal of every human being, that man has no supernatural attributes or component, that there are only temporal and physical consequences for man's actions, and that these results, alone, determine the morality of an action.”¹⁸

None of the contested textbooks expressly endorsed secular humanism or its central tenets. But Judge Hand concluded that these tenets were in various ways logically implicit in many textbook passages. While a religion's “faith assumptions” are “stated outright” in some religious systems, they can also “be implied from less fundamental beliefs.”¹⁹ And Judge Hand was unprepared to permit the religion of secular humanism to escape constitutional scrutiny merely because it left it to students to articulate what was already being implied. Thus, the problem with the history textbooks was not anything that was actually said about religion but what was left unsaid. Likening these texts' treatment of religion to the suppression of black history, one plaintiff complained that they “leave out all meaningful discussion of the part that Christianity and Judaism have played in the history of the United States.”²⁰ To the extent religion was acknowledged at all, it was “generally represented as a private matter, only influencing American public life at some extraordinary moments”—precisely the view of religion that “humanists have been seeking to instill for fifty years.”²¹ This was not only bad history but “ideological promotion.”²² The texts had not expressly declared religion to be irrelevant. But all the omissions functioned to encourage just this conclusion. While the history curriculum did not expressly denigrate religion, it was, as Justice Stewart would say, “so structured” as to achieve precisely this.

¹⁷ *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 655 F. Supp 939, 961 (S.D. Ala. 1987).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 986-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 979.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 947.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 985.

²² *Ibid.*, pg.

The religion of secular humanism operated, not through direct denunciation of traditional religion, but surreptitiously and obliquely, through conspicuous omissions, unacknowledged double-standards, and unarticulated implications. This religion had been established *by insinuation*, under the cover of plausible deniability. One home economics textbook, for example, advised students that "[p]rofessional help includes psychologists, psychiatrist, social workers, counselors, and others who are trained in helping people deal with small and large problems," but did not similarly mention the availability of ministers, rabbis, and priests.²³ Did this omission not to imply the second-class status of religious worldviews? Why else the difference in treatment? Religious counseling did not have to be favored, but should it not at least have been mentioned? Liberals will insist that the passage had nothing to do with religion one way or the other. But just as the Left insists that racism can often be discovered in policies that do not facially respect race, so conservative claimants of cultural oppression insist that secular humanism can make itself felt through practices that do not facially speak to religion but nevertheless imply a judgment about it. This is how secular humanism has insinuated itself in to the American consciousness incrementally, chipping away at traditional values quietly until it becomes accepted as the unnoticed taken-for-granted background of things.

An expert witness detected the same understated denigration of religious faith in a textbook discussion of practical ethics:

The teaching that it is wrong to tell a lie because it results in the disapprobation of your fellow-man, leaves out many an example of how a theist might make this same moral decision. It implies that it is no longer a sin to tell a lie, and this is the advancement of the humanistic approach to morals which are man centered.²⁴

Judge Hand agreed and held that while the Constitution permits the public schools to instruct children that lying is wrong, it also requires that any discussion of this prohibition's possible rationales be religiously even-handed. And the textbooks, with their one-sided man-centered outlook on life, were not even-handed. To defend truth-telling in strictly utilitarian terms—e.g., by admonishing students that lying will lose them friends—is to emphasize this-worldly or man-centered considerations to the implied disparagement of possible other-worldly or God-centered ones. And this is to place the state's imprimatur of approval behind secular humanism to the implicit exclusion of theistic perspectives. A mode of reasoning which Justice Stewart applied to the school day in its entirety was, with Judge Hand, being applied to the minutiae of its curricular content, once again raising a question about when an omission qualifies as an affirmative judgment about the thing omitted.

²³ Ibid., pg. 1000.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 973.

Judge Hand also discovered an affirmative statement of secular humanist orthodoxy in a textbook passage advising students that thoughtful decision-making requires that you “[k]now yourself, accept yourself and believe in yourself, [to] establish a sound self-concept and learn to deal with your strengths and your weaknesses.”²⁵ Innocuous though these words of wisdom may sound, an expert witness explained:

....this statement is fine if one is a secular humanist and has that as one's religious faith. It is not fine if one is a traditional religious Jew or a believing Christian, who believes that we can prepare ourselves to make right decisions by being conformed to the mind of Jesus Christ for the Christian, or to the Torah for the Jew. It is a totally different framework. And again, the offense is that the state is indoctrinating a captive or semi-captive student audience in one religious position, and excluding others.²⁶

In promoting one's self-concept as the basis for proper decision-making, the texts were perforce insinuating the exclusion of other such bases, denigrating Jesus Christ and the Torah as appropriate moral compasses. A “sound self-concept” was not held out as one source of moral guidance among others, but as the exclusive framework for moral decision-making. And this was to promote a secular humanist orthodoxy, to create conditions under which secular categories will seem obvious and religion will simply feel alien or irrelevant.

The *Smith* defendants maintained that “secular humanism is nothing more than a convenient label that attaches to opinions and facts that do not comport with religious world views.”²⁷ Secular humanists do exist, but their potential agreement with some of the textbook passages does not automatically transform these into statements of religious faith. And Judge Hand acknowledged that “[m]ere coincidence between a statement in a textbook and a religious belief is not an establishment of religion.”²⁸ Such a standard would in short order disable the state in most of its functions. As the Supreme Court observed in *McGowan v. Maryland*, the state may prohibit homicide despite the fact that “this agrees with the dictates of the Judaeo-Christian religions while it may disagree with others.”²⁹ However, Judge Hand insisted that a coincidence of position will run afoul of the Establishment Clause if that position involves “faith assumptions” concerning 1) the existence of a supernatural and/or transcendent reality, 2) the nature of man, 3) the ultimate end or purpose of man's existence, individually and

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pg.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 973.

²⁷ *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 655 F. Supp 939, 948 (S.D. Ala. 1987).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 987.

²⁹ *Smith v. Board of Sch. Comm'rs*, 827 F.2d 684, 691-692 (11th Cir. Ala. 1987) (citing *McGowan v. Maryland*, 366 U.S. 420, 442, 6 L. Ed. 2d 393, 81 S. Ct. 1101 (1961) (citations omitted))

collectively, and 4) the purpose and nature of the universe.³⁰ Since these are the basic questions to which religion attempts an answer, to adopt an answer is to have adopted a religious stance for Establishment Clause purposes.

This was why secular humanism constituted a religion. As one expert witness explained, secular humanists have no less than traditional believers “immanentized the eschaton.” Echoing the widespread conservative suspicion that the Left misdirects other-worldly religious passions toward this-worldly objects, he observed that whereas “Christians immanentize symbols of transcendence by claiming that one enters upon immortality through perfection in grace in death, secularists immanentize this by bringing the issue down to this world.” Secular humanists seek not “salvation through grace in death,” but the “perfection of society here in this world”—for example, in the Marxist dream of “changelessness here on earth, in a condition of perfect equality.”³¹ Secular humanism is a religion like traditional theism because both represent competing answers to the same question—how to immanentize the eschaton—just as theism and atheism represent competing answers to the same question, whether God exists. The constitutional upshot, it seems, is that the religiously neutral state must, beyond keeping out of public debates about the existence of God, also treat alternative ways of immanentizing the eschaton with equal respect, by giving theistic immanentizations equal time with “man centered,” secular ones. Religious neutrality as the plaintiffs and Judge Hand conceived of it consisted in neutrality between the City of Man and the City of God, neutrality between purely immanent values and transcendent ones.

This neutrality was violated when the contested passages located the source of ultimate value in human agency rather than God’s agency. The plaintiffs objected to a passage that told students:

When you were very young, you probably accepted all of your family's values without question. As people grow, see more of life, and learn to think on their own, they may choose other values. However, changing a set of values may bring conflict to your life. For example, you may decide that the ideals your friends have will not make you happy. Someday you may be faced with putting your ideals before theirs. Only you can judge your own values.³²

The plaintiffs were predictably disconcerted that this incitement to moral autonomy would interfere with the religious upbringing of their children. But beyond this and more interestingly, they also objected to the passage’s contention that young children will tend to unselfconsciously absorb their families’ values. Adopting no position as to the relative merits of religious and secular upbringings, this merely descriptive claim might seem religiously indifferent, a mere truism of developmental psychology carrying no normative implications for either religion or morality. But the plaintiffs saw things differently:

³⁰ *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 655 F. Supp 939, 979 (S.D. Ala. 1987).

³¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 968-9.

³² *Ibid.*, pg. 1002.

The Christian "values" of which the Websters are convinced are not of their own making. In that sense they are not "our values" but God's. For the Websters to pass them on to their children, therefore, is hardly the self-centered act the authors' rhetoric implies. The very possibility of an enduring our -- "our family, -- our love for one another, -- our Christian home, -- our personhood" -- is predicated on the fact that the Websters have not created themselves. What has truly created them is their acceptance of Christ as their Savior. Says Mrs. Webster, "Jesus is Lord of our lives, and His standard is our standard."³³

The Websters as they saw themselves were simply introducing their children to how things are, as does every responsible parent, and not attempting to shape their children according to some particular mold, as the passage was suggesting. The textbook represented these values' transmission as the family's effort to influence their children religiously, an egocentric attempt to impose their idiosyncratic values upon impressionable minds. But as the Websters understood the situation, it was Christ, not they, who was doing the religious influencing. They themselves only supported this process by protecting their children against whatever distractions or wrong turns might impede it. Their children's values not being the work of their own hands, they would not take the credit that the textbook was giving them and, indeed, insisted that giving it was unconstitutional. Secular humanism had not been expressly endorsed. But it was implicit in the social psychology that the textbooks did endorse, implicit in what purported to be neutral descriptive categories.

Like Justice Stewart, the plaintiffs insisted that they were merely demanding a level playing field for religion. The Websters averred that they would not have been "quite so alarmed" had there been a "free-market competition between rival conceptions of truth in the public school," as "[o]ne set of firmly-held convictions might be balanced by another."³⁴ The objection was not that secular humanist views were being discussed, but that they were being presented as official orthodoxy or taken-for-granted truth rather than as one viewpoint among others. This was what happened when the textbooks simply assumed that the Websters' values were "our values" rather than God's values, without leaving it to students to make this determination.

Dr. Paul Kurtz, an expert witness and a secular humanist, had testified that secular humanism promoted precisely the free-market of ideas that the plaintiffs claimed to believe in. The plaintiffs would identify secular humanism with a set of tenets adversarial to theism. But this represented a fundamental category error. For secular humanism was defined, not by any narrow creed, but by a self-critical, questioning attitude toward all things. While secular humanists "do attempt to educate," they are not zealous proselytizers, for the "very basis of secular humanism is criticism and doubt even about one's own

³³ Ibid., pg. 992.

³⁴ Ibid., pg. 993.

view.”³⁵ Judge Hand was not persuaded by this line of argument, however, and instead remarked on the hypocrisy of secular humanists who inveighed against blind faith while retaining their own blind faith that “as they lack certitude, so must everyone.”³⁶ While secular humanists sought to foist doubt and skepticism upon others, the one thing they were unwilling to question was their own skeptical disposition and desire to inculcate it. And so they were seeking to burden traditional religious believers with an obligation that they were unwilling to assume themselves. They identified neutrality with skepticism or agnosticism, but true neutrality is neutrality *between* faith and skepticism or agnosticism. And so Judge Hand detected “a little bit of Animal Farm,” in this secular humanist neutrality, for which “[a]ll animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.”³⁷

This was not necessarily the calculated outcome of any secretly-hatched backroom conspiracy, however. For just as critical race theorists remind us that we may fail to recognize our own racism, so conservative claims of cultural oppression remind us that we may fail to recognize our own secular humanism and its attendant anti-religious hostility, which may be too pervasive or deep-seated to be recognized as such. Judge Hand acknowledged that many educators deny being significantly influenced by John Dewey, the putative prophet of secular humanism. But as he summarized the testimony of one expert witness,

they feel that way because they, in fact, see through the eyes of Dewey though they do not know it. He analogizes by referring to his glasses. As long as you have them on, you are not aware that you do, and thus Dewey is the spectacles through which American educators have been trained to see the world. ...it is not surprising that they no longer see Dewey because they see with Dewey.³⁸

The problem was not a conspiracy of zealots but the institutional reification of a changeable social order, the false consciousness into which secular humanism has enslaved its most aggressive agents. The downplaying of Dewey’s influence was simply testimony to the fact that his conquest has become so complete as to now go unnoticed as the taken-for-granted background of things. It has, like other features of modern liberalism, entered “into the realm of habit, taste, and feeling, becoming along the way not only ideas that are espoused but also a way of life,” as Roger Kimball says. Thus, an expert witness explained that one source of the problem laid in the Boston and New York publishers who produced the contested textbooks. While these publishers’ primary motivations were financial rather than ideological, their schooling and the “milieu from which they came” had left them “uneasy” about traditional religion,

³⁵ Ibid., pg. 964.

³⁶ Ibid., pg. 992.

³⁷ Ibid., pg. 993.

³⁸ Ibid., pg. 958.

and so oblivious to their textbooks' secular humanist slant.³⁹ In an inversion of the usual stereotype that we have again and again observed to be a defining feature of conservative claims of cultural oppression, it was the secularists, not the religious conservatives, who were the victims of a narrow, parochial upbringing and the shunted horizons to which it condemned them. Correlatively, it was the religious conservative, the despised outsider speaking truth to power, who has been rewarded with a privileged insight into the contingency of the taken-for-granted. For he sees the eyes of Dewey as those who see through them cannot, and this is why he has not been beguiled by liberal neutrality.

* * *

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression all accept some version of what Carl Esbeck calls the "myth-of-neutrality assertion," the position that "state neutrality is not only impossible and thus a myth, but worse, it is a ploy calculated to use the state as an instrument for advancing philosophies that are antithetical to Christianity." "[E]ither the state favors Christianity or it favors an opposing philosophy," there being no neutral ground in between.⁴⁰ Not every conservative will go quite this far. Some may believe that while neutrality between theism and atheism is impossible, the state can successfully decline to play favorites between Christianity and other theistic faiths. Or else they may, like Judge Hand, believe that though what now passes for neutrality is fraudulent, the genuine article could be realized or better approximated by requiring teachers to give religious perspectives "equal time" with secular ones.

But however they be expressed theoretically, these apprehensions about the encroachment of an evangelizing, quasi-conspiratorial secular humanism strike liberals as simply too extravagant to warrant serious consideration. Robert Boston writes that to imagine that a small cadre of secular humanists "have managed to seize control of all major institutions is to suspend reason." Such a scenario is simply "too fantastic for any thinking person to believe."⁴¹ And so liberals must agree with the *Smith* Court of Appeals, which characterized the contested textbooks as just a "governmental attempt to instill in Alabama public school children such values as independent thought, tolerance of diverse views, self-respect, maturity, self-reliance and logical decision-making."⁴² Judge Hand, it charged, had turned the "establishment clause requirement of 'lofty neutrality' on the part of the public schools into an affirmative obligation to speak

³⁹ Ibid., pg. 95x.

⁴⁰ Carl H. Esbeck, *Religion and a Neutral State: Imperative or Impossibility*, 15 Cumb. L. Rev. 67, 68 (1984-85).

⁴¹ Robert Boston, *Why the Religious Right Is Wrong about Separation of Church and State* (Amherst New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), pg. 27-28.

⁴² Ibid. pg. 684.

about religion.”⁴³ While Judge Hand sought to justify an affirmative obligation to speak about religion as a reasonable corrective to secularist bias, this “bias” was nothing more than the benign cultivation of democratic virtue, which religious fundamentalists have somehow misconstrued as religious oppression.

From the liberal perspective, what these fundamentalists hold out as their special insight into the fraudulence of liberal neutrality seems to rest on a set of manifest category errors. The students were directed to establish a sound self-concept, but surely this is not incompatible with conforming one’s mind to Jesus or the Torah, if that is what one’s self-concept requires—or with conforming one’s mind to the doctrines of a Richard Dawkins, if one has an atheistic self-concept. And is the characterization of the Websters’ values as “their” own not perfectly accurate and perfectly neutral as far as it goes? These values belong to the Websters in the ordinary sense that they are accepted and acted upon by them. Whether or not these values are God-given is another question, as to which the textbook remained silent. Why, here too, will silence not suffice? Moreover, the fact that other-worldly rationales for truth-telling are being disregarded in one particular setting—public schools—does not imply some general opposition to religion. A public school teacher may warn students that plagiarism will be punished with a failing grade without also noting the possibility of other, supra-temporal sanctions. Why, then, may she not similarly address the temporal to the exclusion of the eternal in the context of a slightly more theoretical discussion of practical ethics? Whatever our religious beliefs, we can all agree that lying does not benefit friendships or maximize utility generally. There may be other reasons not to lie as well, but to say nothing about them is also to say nothing against them.

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression seem either unable or unwilling to recognize some fairly clear-cut distinctions. In *Schempp*, this was the distinction between not celebrating religion and disparaging it, between the non-affirmation of a proposition and its negation. In *Smith*, this was additionally the distinction between the promotion of individual autonomy and the individual’s choice of substantive ends, and between those beliefs which fall within an overlapping consensus—like the harmful consequences of lying—and those which lie outside of it—like deific proscriptions against bearing false witness. It seems self-evident to liberals that religious conservatives who bewail the encroachment of secular humanism are arguing in bad faith. Basking in their sense of righteous besiegement, they moreover overlook whatever facts are inconsistent with their grievances. As the Court of Appeals observed in overturning Judge Hand, “many of the books specifically acknowledge that religion is one source of moral values and none preclude that possibility.”⁴⁴ Indeed, one passage observed that religion

⁴³ *Smith v. Board of Sch. Comm'rs*, 827 F.2d 684, 695 (11th Cir. Ala. 1987).

⁴⁴ *Smith v. Board of Sch. Comm'rs*, 827 F.2d 684, 692 (11th Cir. Ala. 1987).

“offers psychological security which can be helpful in your life” and also “broadens the dimensions of your faith in yourself and in others.”⁴⁵ As to tradition more generally, another passage made it clear that students should not hesitate to follow their dreams even if they “fit into the more traditional mold” because students should “think well of themselves and their individuality.”⁴⁶ Would it not have been more reasonable, ask secular liberals, to interpret the offending passages against the backdrop of such declarations? Religious conservatives, it seems, are prepared to ignore whatever facts they need to ignore in order to cloak a theocratic agenda in the garb of equal respect, which they have already received.

2. The Meaning of the Secular

Although worries about secular humanism in textbooks sound conspiratorial in a way that the seemingly more temperate arguments of Justices Stewart and Scalia do not, the conceptual nuclei of all these arguments are in fact closely akin, revolving as they do around a fundamental disagreement about the *meaning of the secular*. This is the question that is always being impliedly or expressly adjudicated in the religious neutrality controversy. It is the root cause of the communication breakdown that seems to afflict every attempt to negotiate the issue.

This was highlighted in *County of Alleghany v. ACLU*, which adjudicated the constitutionality of a nativity scene situated inside a government building. Adopting the endorsement test first developed by Justice O'Connor in her *Lynch v. Donnelly* concurrence, a majority of the Justices agreed that the question turned on whether these displays would, given their settings, convey the state's endorsement of a particular religion or religion in general. The state has endorsed religion in violation of the Constitution when the purpose of its action was to send, or when it could be reasonably interpreted as sending, a message to non-believers “that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community” and, correlatively, “an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.”⁴⁷

The *Alleghany* Court determined that the nativity scene indeed sent this message. The nativity scene in *Lynch* had been upheld as constitutional. But this was because it had been just one component of a larger display, whose otherwise secular contents—a Santa Clause, a talking wishing well, etc.—had satisfactorily subdued the religious significance of the nativity scene. Taken in context, the crèche could be plausibly construed as a mere depiction of the holiday's religious origins—a bare historical fact to which

⁴⁵ *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 655 F. Supp 939, 1000 (S.D. Ala. 1987).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 1004.

⁴⁷ *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S 668, 688 (1984) (O'Connor, J., concurring).

the state may direct our attention without abdicating its neutrality, just as it may include religious paintings in its art museums. By contrast, the nativity scene in *Allegheny* stood in prominent isolation by the grand staircase of the county courthouse. It was accompanied, not by any secularizing chachka, but by a banner proclaiming “Glory to God in the Highest” in Latin. The Court therefore ruled the display unconstitutional. For while the “government may acknowledge Christmas as a cultural phenomenon,” the Establishment Clause prohibits it from observing “it as a Christian holy day by suggesting that people praise God for the birth of Jesus.”⁴⁸ And the function of the display was to communicate precisely this message.

Writing in dissent, Justice Kennedy objected to what he judged to be the merciless logic of the endorsement test:

Rather than requiring government to avoid any action that acknowledges or aids religion, the Establishment Clause permits government some latitude in recognizing and accommodating the central role religion plays in our society.Any approach less sensitive to our heritage would border on latent hostility toward religion, as it would require government in all its multifaceted roles to acknowledge only the secular, to the exclusion and so to the detriment of the religious.⁴⁹

If government is to participate in its citizens' celebration of a holiday that contains both a secular and a religious component, enforced recognition of only the secular aspect would signify the callous indifference toward religious faith that our cases and traditions do not require; for by commemorating the holiday only as it is celebrated by nonadherents, the government would be refusing to acknowledge the plain fact, and the historical reality, that many of its citizens celebrate its religious aspects as well.⁵⁰

The approach adopted by the majority contradicts important values embodied in the Clause. Obsessive, implacable resistance to all but the most carefully scripted and secularized forms of accommodation requires this Court to act as a censor, issuing national decrees as to what is orthodox and what is not. What is orthodox, in this context, means what is secular; the only Christmas the State can acknowledge is one in which references to religion have been held to a minimum. The Court thus lends its assistance to an Orwellian rewriting of history as many understand it. I can conceive of no judicial function more antithetical to the First Amendment.⁵¹

The Court responded in the typical liberal fashion. Outraged and incredulous, it answered that “nothing could be further from the truth, and the accusations could be said to be as offensive as they are absurd.”⁵² It was in fact Justice Kennedy who had descended into “Orwellian newspeak” in portraying the secular as some kind of sectarian ideology. To say that the First Amendment privileges atheism over theism would indeed be an Orwellian rewriting of history. But to speak of the secular as having been somehow privileged over the religious is to lapse into a category error: Since a “secular state establishes neither

⁴⁸ *County of Allegheny v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573, 601 (U.S. 1989).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 657.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 663-64.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 678.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pg. 610.

atheism nor religion as its official creed,” Justice Kennedy “has it exactly backwards when he says that enforcing the Constitution's requirement that government remain secular is a prescription of orthodoxy.”⁵³ For the “government does not discriminate against any citizen on the basis of the citizen's religious faith if the government is secular in its functions and operations.”⁵⁴ In a spirit reminiscent of the Court of Appeals’ rebuke to Judge Hand, the Court accused Justice Kennedy of misconstruing “a respect for religious pluralism, a respect commanded by the Constitution, as hostility or indifference to religion.” “No misperception, the Court lamented, “could be more antithetical to the values embodied in the Establishment Clause.”⁵⁵

This disagreement crystallizes the conceptual core of the religious neutrality problem. Concurring in *Schempp*, Justice Goldberg warned that “untutored devotion to the concept of neutrality can lead to invocation or approval of results which partake not simply of that noninterference and noninvolvement with the religious which the Constitution commands, but of a brooding and pervasive devotion to the secular and a passive, or even active, hostility to the religious.”⁵⁶ But *Alleghany* suggests that to frame the stakes in terms of a quantitative distinction between moderation and excess, as Goldberg appears to be doing, is to obscure the fundamental problem. This problem is the *meaning* of the secular, the latter’s conceptual relationship to the religious. For it was on precisely this question that the *Alleghany* Court and Justice Kennedy simply lock horns. The question was whether it is not only the atheistic, but also the merely secular, that can in some sense stand in opposition to the religious. Whereas the Court believed that the secular occupies a neutral ground in between theism and atheism, Justice Kennedy seemed to imply that the secular is in some sense allied with atheism against theism. This was the result, not of anyone’s “brooding and pervasive devotion” to the secular, but of something inherent to the secular itself.

This problem was taken up directly in *Grove v. Mead School District*, a lower court case in which plaintiffs objected to a public classroom’s use of a novel, *The Learning Tree*, which chronicled the adolescent rebellion of an African-American male grown cynical about religion. The book, they argued, violated the Establishment Clause by promoting “a set of secular, if not anti-religious values,” which they labeled secular humanism.⁵⁷ Incredulous, the Court of Appeals responded, like Dr. Kurtz in *Smith*, that the plaintiffs had collapsed the crucial distinction between critical questioning and dogma. For while *The Learning Tree* “poses questions and ponders doubts with which plaintiffs may be uncomfortable, to pose

⁵³ Ibid., pg. 611-12.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 610.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 610.

⁵⁶ *District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 306 (U.S. 1963) (J. Goldberg, concurring).

⁵⁷ *Grove v. Mead School Dist.*, 753 F.2d 1528, 1535 (9th Cir. Wash. 1985).

questions is not to impose answers.”⁵⁸ The use of that novel did indeed qualify as secular, as the plaintiffs contended. However,

The analytical difficulty with plaintiffs' approach is that it tends to divide the universe of value-laden thought into only two categories -- the religious and the anti-religious. By adopting this dualistic social outlook, and by denominating the anti-religious half of their universe as "secular," plaintiffs erect an insurmountable barrier to meaningful application of the establishment clause to controversies like this one. Whether the inclusion of *The Learning Tree* in the curriculum violates the establishment clause depends, under *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, upon whether that inclusion reflects a secular purpose and produces a secular effect. The difficulty is that plaintiffs might well concede that the primary purpose and effect was secular; indeed, that is precisely their point.⁵⁹

It is apparent that so long as plaintiffs deem that which is "secular" in orientation to be anti-religious, they are not dealing in the same linguistic currency as the Supreme Court's establishment decisions. If the establishment clause is to have any meaning, distinctions must be drawn to recognize not simply "religious" and "anti-religious," but "non-religious" governmental activity as well. In the parlance of *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, "secular" must mean "non-religious." Therefore, plaintiffs cannot succeed in demonstrating a violation of the establishment clause by showing that the school authorities are somehow advancing "secular" goals.⁶⁰

As with *Alleghany*, the issue in *Grove* was not *degree* of devotion to the secular, but whether such devotion qualifies as non-religious or anti-religious, or indeed counter-religious, in the context at hand. It was ultimately a question about how the universe of possible state activity and inactivity is to be divided as between the religious, the non-religious, and the anti-religious. Like Justice Stewart in *Schempp*, Judge Hand in *Smith*, and Justice Kennedy in *Alleghany*, the *Grove* plaintiffs appeared to be defining the religious and the anti-religious in such a way as to leave little room for the non-religious. In all these cases, the argument was that the ostensibly non-religious is in fact anti-religious, that what gets represented as just *different from* the religious is in some hidden sense *opposed to* it, which is why the *Grove* plaintiffs defined the "secular" as they did.

But as liberals see it, this is an exercise in rhetorical obfuscation that disingenuously equivocates between two plainly distinct senses of the "secular." As the *Grove* Court observed, the plaintiffs had failed "to distinguish the process of secularization from the promotion of secularism." Though the Establishment Clause prohibits "the promotion of secularism as a body of anti-religious doctrine," the "process of secularization has been the means of achieving compliance with the establishment clause."⁶¹ The plaintiffs had failed to distinguish between the secular *qua* universalistic dispensation—the "non-religious" wherein religious questions are simply not implicated—and the secular *qua* parochial

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pg.1541.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 1536.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pg.

⁶¹ *Grove v. Mead School Dist.*, 753 F.2d 1528, 1538 (9th Cir. Wash. 1985).

worldview—the anti-religious, or “freethinking,” or whatever, which involves a negative judgment on religion. Both senses of the “secular” put religion out of play. But there is a difference between forbidding religious *questions* and forbidding religious *answers*. Only the latter qualifies as the establishment of a secularist orthodoxy. And this is not what the state is doing when it refrains from sponsoring school prayer or municipal nativity scenes.

These distinctions are the reason why public school teachers are constitutionally obligated to provide students with an uncompromisingly secular educational product yet constitutionally proscribed from including lectures lauding the virtues of a “secular” way of life—just as they may not laud a religious way of life. A municipal law providing that all a city’s funds be expended for primarily Christian purposes would qualify as the establishment of the religion of Christianity. And yet a law that, in codification of the *Lemon* test, required that they be expended for primarily secular purposes—like erecting Christmas trees free of religious accoutrements—would survive constitutional scrutiny notwithstanding that the state could not constitutionally *say* that the holiday season is best celebrated in a secular fashion. While the state cannot pursue religious purposes without implicitly endorsing the religious to the detriment of the non-religious, it can pursue non-religious purposes without implicitly endorsing the non-religious to the detriment of the religious.

Religious conservatives appear to be denying this, denying that the secular has a dual meaning as either non-religious or anti-religious and that one can be the former without also being the latter. But this denial strikes secular liberals as transparently disingenuous. The problem with denying the dual meaning of secular is not simply that it erects an “insurmountable barrier to the meaningful application of the Establishment Clause,” as the *Grove* Court warned, but that it does not ring true to our everyday lives and common sense. After all, religious conservatives seem to engage in the very same “secular” activities—like shopping and driving to work—as do secular liberals, without feeling that they have somehow betrayed their religion in favor of an alternative faith. And if religious believers can undertake secular activities without thereby rejecting religious faith, then why may the state not be construed as doing the same when it erects Christmas trees and Santa’s sleighs but not nativity scenes? In what respect, then, can the secular be said to operate “to the exclusion and so to the detriment of the religious,” as Justice Kennedy maintained?

David Limbaugh complains in his *Persecution* of a receptionist in a Dallas school district who was reprimanded for sending a group e-mail message from her office computer that promoted President Bush’s National Day of Prayer. This communication was said to be in violation of the district’s prohibition on email messages for “commercial, for-profit, purposes, political purposes, religious worship, or

proselytizing.” But Limbaugh observes that the school district “had no problem with its employees sending non-work-related messages over its email system, including jokes, secular messages of encouragement, event invitations, and chain messages.”⁶² And Limbaugh believes that this double-standard betrays a pervasive cultural hostility toward Christianity. But liberals do not see the hypocritical anti-religious hostility that Limbaugh is alleging. A “secular message of encouragement” like “have a nice day” does not promote an orthodoxy that excludes religious believers, who also communicate secular messages of encouragement from time to time. This is why allowing only secular, but not religious, messages of encouragement does not deprive religious believers of any kind of equal dignity or respect. And this is because religious believers can in practice recognize the distinction between the non-religious and the anti-religious, whatever they may imply and their lawsuits and polemics. The dual meaning of the secular, then, is not some arbitrary, self-serving precept of liberal ideology. On the contrary, it is attested to in the speech and conduct of religious believers themselves.

It is also attested to by Justice Kennedy’s own reasoning. Justice Kennedy maintained that while the “Religion Clauses do not require the government to acknowledge these holidays or their religious components...our strong tradition of government accommodation and acknowledgment permits government to do so.”⁶³ The question we posed to Justice Stewart recurs here. If the secular truly is an exclusionary orthodoxy, then why should the Establishment Clause not also *require* that any secular holiday displays be counterbalanced by religious ones? Perhaps the government can forgo all acknowledgment of the holiday season without affront to religious believers. But having elected to acknowledge it, why should it then be permitted to exploit the occasion to promote a historically revisionist secular orthodoxy? Justice Kennedy would permit Alleghany County to establish a policy providing that only secular holiday symbols like Santa’s sleighs and giant dradles may be officially sponsored by the city. But why should the County be allowed to act on a general principle that, when acted upon by the Court, qualifies as latent hostility toward religion? If the outcome in *Alleghany* qualifies as a “national decree as to what is orthodox and what is not,” as Kennedy says, then such an ordinance would be a local decree to that effect, and that is constitutionally speaking a distinction without a difference. Once again, we see that conservatives are unprepared to take their logic to its ultimate conclusion. And this once again suggests to liberals a certain disingenuousness, a certain willingness to manipulate language in whatever way can help achieve what are incipiently theocratic ends.

⁶² David Limbaugh, *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2004), pg. 35.

⁶³ *County of Allegheny v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573, 664 (U.S. 1989) (Kennedy, J. dissenting)..

A thought experiment highlights the basic problem. Suppose that Alleghany County had instituted a policy providing that only Christian, and not Jewish, holiday symbols may be officially sponsored. We can easily transpose Justice Kennedy's reasoning to this hypothetical and object:

If government is to participate in its citizens' celebration of a holiday season of which there are both Christian and Jewish versions, enforced recognition of only the Christian one would signify the callous indifference toward Judaism that our cases and traditions do not require; for by commemorating the holiday only as it is celebrated by Christians, the government would be refusing to acknowledge the plain fact, and the historical reality, that many of its citizens celebrate the season in the Jewish fashion as well.

But in *this* case, Justice Kennedy would presumably insist that Alleghany County juxtapose a menorah by any nativity scenes or do away with holiday displays altogether. By contrast, he is not prepared to compel the placement of nativity scenes alongside any Christmas trees or Santa's sleighs. Why, then, does he *describe* the secular and the religious as ideologically antagonistic competitors, in the way that two religions might be, when he is not prepared to actually *treat* them that way? Justice Kennedy's argument is belied by the simple fact that the average believing Christian does not walk past a government sponsored Christmas tree and conclude that the government is pursuing an agenda of secularist hegemony. "Secular" though they may be, Christmas trees, elves, and Santa's sleighs are not alien symbols to the believing Christian in the way that a cross will be an alien symbol to the believing, or non-believing, Jew.

And this is, once again, because real, flesh-and-blood religious believers are capable of distinguishing between the two senses of the secular, distinguishing between the secular *qua* anti-religious and the secular *qua* non-religious. In what, then, can this secularist orthodoxy possibly consist? Given the many contexts in which religious conservatives' own conduct acknowledges a distinction between the non-religious and the anti-religious, their willingness to collapse it in others suggests to liberals a disingenuous ploy through which to impose their own religious preferences. By characterizing the facially non-religious as the anti-religious or counter-religious, they simply generate cover for their own religious imperiousness, casting the latter as nothing more than a benign corrective to some alleged inequity.

Understanding themselves to be engaged in a rearguard action in an attempt to salvage some small vestige of their traditions, religious conservatives insist that it is these secular liberal anxieties about theocratic encroachment that are suspect as pretexts for the venting of anti-religious hostility, which they are simply resisting. The Websters were anguished that "the "fringe has become the center, and everything that has gone before -- including (or perhaps especially) [their] Christianity --

appears scheduled to pass away under the raised regimen.”⁶⁴ But liberals will respond that while these conservatives may be on the defensive in relation to their ambitions, they are on the offensive in relation to their proper rights, which is why these feelings of being on the defensive are themselves offensive ploys. The *Alleghany* Court observed:

To be sure, in a pluralistic society there may be some would-be theocrats, who wish that their religion were an established creed, and some of them perhaps may be even audacious enough to claim that the lack of established religion discriminates against their preferences. But this claim gets no relief, for it contradicts the fundamental premise of the Establishment Clause itself. The antidiscrimination principle inherent in the Establishment Clause necessarily means that would-be discriminators on the basis of religion cannot prevail.⁶⁵

The Establishment Clause would be eviscerated of all meaning if the principle of non-discrimination was construed to prohibit “discriminating” against the discriminatory impulses of would-be theocrats. And it seems that conservative claimants of cultural oppression are demanding nothing less than this evisceration. Is it not obvious, ask liberals, that it is these claimants of cultural oppression, and not they, who assert rights they could not possibly permit others? What else could explain religious conservatives’ persistent inability or unwillingness to appreciate the distinctions that are obvious to liberals, like the distinction between first-order discrimination, which the Constitution proscribes, and second-order discrimination—discrimination against discrimination—without which the Constitution could not be enforced?

The religious conservatives’ logical position is, it seems, essentially akin to that of a prisoner who, having been convicted of kidnapping—and so imprisoned in consequence of his own attempts to imprison others—proceeds to accuse his jailers of hypocrisy for permitting to themselves what they will not allow him. Just like this prisoner, the conservative overlooks that, to the extent he is being oppressed, this is only in his capacity as a would-be oppressor. And so there can be no moral equivalency between the oppression which he claims to suffer and the oppression which he would inflict upon others in order to relieve it. For the religious conservatives’ indignation at secularist oppression seems directly proportional to his own desire to oppress secularists—and is indeed merely the frustrated expression of that desire. His humble pleas for greater sensitivity toward religion, then, are but the songs of sirens, invitations to take a first step onto a slippery slope terminating in theocracy. Judge Hand concluded that the educational establishment could not see Dewey because it now sees through the eyes of Dewey. But if religious

⁶⁴ *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 655 F. Supp 939, 993 (S.D. Ala. 1987).

⁶⁵ *County of Alleghany v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573, 610-11 (U.S. 1989).

conservatives fail to recognize the incipiently theocratic nature of their arguments, this can only be because they see through the eyes of theocrats.

3. The Immanent Frame

Do conservatives complaining of secularist oppression genuinely fail to understand these points? Are they merely pretending not to understand? Do they perhaps not *want* to understand? Or is it rather this very secular liberal incredulity that calls for an explanation? Here as elsewhere, the root of the problem lies in a clash of cosmological orientations. For what liberals interpret as religious conservatives' disingenuous equivocation between two plainly distinct senses of the "secular" is in fact the logical expression of a pre-modern sensibility, which compels religious conservatives too see liberal neutrality as fraudulent. Conversely, liberals' incredulity before these charges of fraudulence is the product of the modern, buffered identity, which is what compels liberals to understand the secular as they do. As we will now see, what usually presents itself as a conflict between the religious and the secular is in fact a conflict between the modern and pre-modern understandings of *the relationship* between the religious and the secular. And this is the reason why the religious neutrality problem has proven intractable.

As we noted in Chapter 5, "religion" as understood by pre-moderns did not refer to a distinct sphere to which people turned their attention here and again in search of spiritual solace. On the contrary, religion constituted the total background against which individuals made sense of their lives. The existence of God was not simply a theological proposition, but the condition for the intelligibility of all things, including ostensibly "secular" spheres, whose meaning was a function of their place in a religiously-defined cosmos. This is, as we saw, why one could speak of parish priests as part of the "secular clergy." They were secular, not in the sense of being "non-religious," but because they acted in the day-to-day world of village life, away from the higher rungs of religious devotion occupied by monastics. The medieval world, as we know, was divided between those who worked, those who fought, and those who prayed. And while working and fighting were indeed "secular" undertakings, this very division of labor was part and parcel of a religious worldview, of the order that God had ordained. The medieval concept of the secular was, as Stolzenberg puts it, *theological*,⁶⁶ because it implied a religious hierarchy of the higher and the lower. The "traditional religious conception of the division between religious and secular realms," she writes, "partakes of the more basic theological conception of a divide between the heavenly

⁶⁶ Nomi Stolzenberg, *The Profanity of Law*, in *LAW AND THE SACRED*, eds. Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, and Martha Merrill Umphrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) pgs.

realm of the spirit and the earthly realm of matter.”⁶⁷ And so the “temporal world’s secularism consists in nothing more or less than its (necessary) estrangement from the sacred.”⁶⁸ This estrangement was in no way “non-religious” because it was only intelligible on the basis of religion. The *Grove* Court would divide the “universe of value-laden thought” between the religious, the non-religious, and the anti-religious. But pre-moderns divided it as between the more religious and the less religious. The secular realm, was defined, not by the *absence* of religion, but by its *remove* from the higher rungs of religious devotion, by its remove from the heavenly realm, and so *presupposed* religion as its broader cosmological framework.

This pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular was just the corollary of what we already observed to be the pre-modern, porous self’s total embeddedness in an order of things from which it could not hope to distance itself. As Taylor explains, pre-moderns submitted to “the imbrications of higher times” as “a matter of common, ‘naïve’ experience, something not yet a candidate for belief or disbelief because it is just obviously there...”⁶⁹ Pre-moderns did not possess a “secular consciousness” in the contemporary sense, not because they were “dogmatic,” but because religion informed their very sense of agency, their pre-reflective sense of things’ meaning. They did not simply have different religious beliefs than do we, but also a different understanding of *what it means to believe*. The contrast is illustrated by Wittgenstein when he observes:

When I sat down on this chair, of course I believed it would bear me. I had no thought of its possibly collapsing.

But: “In spite of everything, I held fast to the belief...” Here is the thought, and perhaps constant struggle, to renew an attitude.⁷⁰

Whereas the pre-modern, porous self “believes” in the first, “enfleshed” sense, the modern, buffered self believes in the second, “excarnated” sense. Understanding the secular in abstraction from the religious, the buffered self is no longer unselfconsciously immersed in an enchanted world of charged objects. With its disengaged “inner base area,” it cannot be brought into the sacred’s “field of force” and so must, as Wittgenstein says, “hold fast” to its religious beliefs. By contrast, the porous self of the enchanted world is held fast *by* its religious beliefs. Religion is here lived, not as a set of propositions about the world, but as the world itself, the pre-reflective given described in Wittgenstein’s first sense of belief. Faith was an attitude of adhesion rather than theoretical agreement. The question was not whether or not one would assent to the existence of God *qua* causal hypothesis but whether one would cling to him *qua* the

⁶⁷ Nomi Stolzenberg, *Theses on Secularism*, 47 San Diego L. Rev. 1041, 1057 (2010).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 1069.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 58-59.

⁷⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Pearson, 1973), pg. 575.

foundation of one's being. A pre-modern might concern himself with the strength of his faith. However, this was not a faith *in* a religious worldview but a faith *within* a religious worldview. One had more or less faith in *God*—the way one might have more or less faith in another person—not more or less faith in the *religion* that posits this God. And this is because the idea of “religion” had not yet been abstracted away from the totality of the human condition as just one component thereof.

This “blurring” of the religious and the secular did not mean that the religious and the secular could not enter into conflict. But they did so, not as *two incompatible worldviews*, but as *two sets of prerogatives within one worldview* that have for some reason been brought into disequilibrium. The secular was not inherently “anti-religious,” for God had created the secular no less than the eternal. But the secular and the eternal could, as Taylor says, “flare into opposition when humans cling to their ‘secular’ condition as ultimate.”⁷¹ The risk posed by the secular was the risk of “invest[ing] our little parcel with eternal significance, and therefore divinizing things, and therefore falling deeper into sin.”⁷² The secular could challenge the religious, not as the theorized denial of God's existence or relevance, but as a kind of temptation that human beings may come to fetishize at the expense of the truly higher. Only at this point did the otherwise “less religious” become anti-religious. The meaning of the secular was in this respect indeterminate. This indeterminacy was why St. Augustine could write that “the goods that are pursued by sinners are in no way evil things, and neither is free will itself, which we found is to be counted among the intermediate goods.” The evil lies, not in the intrinsic character of these goods, but in “the turning of the will away from the unchangeable good and toward changeable goods.”⁷³ The secular was the realm of “changeable goods,” which could be legitimately pursued only inasmuch as their lesser status within a religiously defined hierarchy was acknowledged. But to forget this status was to lapse into evil. The secular could not represent “neutrality” as between theism and atheism, as it does for modern liberals, because the secular assumed an either theistic or atheistic meaning according to whether its proper relationship to the eternal, or religious, was recognized. While secular desires are appropriate to our fallen nature, they also fall short of the highest good—God—who must always be kept in mind as the wider context of secular desires if these are not to devolve into sinfulness.

What the *Grove* Court called the “process of secularization” is not just the quantitative displacement of the religious by the secular in the sense of the waning of strong religious belief or effective religious authority, but also *a qualitative transformation in the very concept of the secular and its*

⁷¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 265.

⁷² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 57.

⁷³ St. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), pg. 68.

relationship to the religious. Secularization is the transformation of the secular into a self-contained realm that is intelligible apart from what pre-moderns understand to be the secular realm's wider religious context. For pre-moderns, the secular and the eternal were related to each other as what Taylor calls an *internal dyad*. As with the dyads "up" and "down" or "left" and "right," the one side was simply inconceivable apart from the other. But with modernity, they become related as an *external dyad*. The secular and the religious remain *defined* in relation to each other, because to say that something is secular is also to say that it is not religious, and vice versa. But the dependence of the secular on the religious is now *conceptual* rather than *ontological*, because it has now become possible to believe that the secular, temporal world is all that exists. Only at this point can one entertain a secular worldview in opposition to a religious one, because only at this point does the existence of a religious reality become open to doubt.

Whereas the porous self of pre-modernity inhabits an enchanted world in which the material cannot be conceived apart from the spiritual, the modern, buffered self inhabits *the immanent frame*. To inhabit the immanent frame is, Taylor explains, to have accepted

our familiar picture of the natural, 'physical' universe as governed by exceptionless laws, which may reflect the wisdom and benevolence of the creator, but don't require in order to be understood—or (at least on the first level) explained—any reference to a good aimed at, whether in the form of a Platonic Idea, or of Ideas in the mind of God.⁷⁴

The immanent frame is in and of itself neither theistic nor atheistic. It admits of both "open" and "closed" construals according to whether one believes that the natural world is or is not opened out to a transcendent dispensation. But whereas it is the religious that defines the meaning of the secular within the pre-modern dispensation, the order of dependence is reversed within the immanent frame, which provides the context in which the religious must be conceptualized and defended, limiting the shapes that religion may assume accordingly. The immanent frame involves the "hiving off an independent, free-standing level, that of 'nature,' which may or may not be in interaction with something further or beyond."⁷⁵ And so whatever it is that might lie "further or beyond" must be compatible with this understanding of nature, as a self-enclosed realm of strict physical causality. Religion thus becomes a kind of "supplementary explanation" that may perhaps enrich our understanding of existence writ large but is no longer required to make sense of our day-to-day fortunes. Accordingly, God thus becomes less and less a force to be reckoned with and more and more a first cause, more and more a god of the philosophers, a grand designer rather than a village magistrate. As we saw, pre-moderns inhabited a world of "charged objects," believing that certain points in space and time—such as sacred relics or holy

⁷⁴ Ibid., pg. 542.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pg. 14.

sites—were infused with augmented levels of divinity, which could then redound to the advantage of those who established the proper contact with them. But this is precisely what the immanent frame precludes, because God cannot be “involved” with the universe at this level of specificity.

The immanent frame’s influence on our everyday thinking about religion is illustrated in *Prince v. Massachusetts*, a Free Exercise claim by a Jehovah’s Witness against a Massachusetts child labor law that prohibited her from apprenticing her eight-year old daughter in the religiously compulsory street pamphleteering of Jehovah’s Witnesses literature. Massachusetts had prohibited this kind of child labor, and the Court found this to be justified by the state’s legitimate interest in preventing “the crippling effects of child employment, more especially in public places, and the possible harms arising from other activities subject to all the diverse influences of the street.”⁷⁶ Notwithstanding anyone’s religious scruples, it was “the interest of youth itself, and of the whole community, that children be both safeguarded from abuses and given opportunities for growth into free and independent well-developed men and citizens.”⁷⁷ Though the daughter had testified that dereliction of duty here would bring her condemnation “to everlasting destruction at Armageddon,” this testimony had been excluded at trial.⁷⁸

The Court framed the question before it as concerning whether an individual’s religious beliefs could trump the state’s legitimate interest in protecting child welfare. But the interesting question, and the one that the Court did not acknowledge it was answering, is whether those beliefs are relevant to *our assessment of whether the state is in fact pursuing that legitimate interest*. The state’s interest in assuring that children be granted “opportunities for growth into free and independent well-developed men and citizens” is beyond dispute. But a Jehovah’s Witness would argue that this growth would be cut tragically short by everlasting destruction at Armageddon, the precise point which had been excluded from evidence at trial. And the reason for this exclusion was the immanent frame, to which a Free Exercise claim must conform if it is to be cognized. A religious claim might be *weighed against* secular considerations. But it cannot be permitted *to inform what those considerations are to consist in*, because these must proceed without reference to their possible embeddedness within a transcendent dispensation. The daughter’s worries about Armageddon were excluded from evidence, not because the Court had judged them false, but because to admit them would be to contravene the immanent frame, which does not deny the religious but demands that the secular be understood on its own terms.

⁷⁶ *Prince v. Massachusetts*, 321 U.S. 158, 168 (U.S. 1944)

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 165.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pgs. 162-63.

The *Prince* Court was religiously neutral inasmuch as it did not formally endorse or reject any theological propositions. But it was not neutral inasmuch as it presumed a particular conception of the relationship between the religious and the secular. The Court in *United States v. Ballard* upheld the founders' vision that "Man's relation to his God" is to be "no concern of the state."⁷⁹ But *Prince* illustrates that "man's relation to his God" must be *defined* in such a way that it could not rationally become an object of state concern, defined as the object of inner mental asset rather than as a living force in nature. To the extent God is experienced as a causal presence, the state cannot but interfere in that relationship. And this is why that relationship must be defined in the context of the immanent frame, through a modern understanding of the relationship between the secular and the religious. The *Prince* Court was neutral as to God's existence. But it was not neutral as to what God would have to be like if he exists, for its God was a God constrained by the immanent frame.

* * *

The origin of the religious neutrality problem now lies plainly before our eyes. The neutrality that secular liberals have to offer is neutrality between the religious and the secular *within* the modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular—that is, neutrality within the immanent frame. It is neutrality vis-à-vis the question of whether it is wise or worthwhile to believe in a transcendent dispensation to supplement the purely temporal order that is plainly before us and intelligible on its own terms. The immanent frame was being endorsed in Justice Jackson's dissent in *Everson v. Board of Education*, where the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of a school district's policy of subsidizing the bus fares of parochial school students alongside those of public school students. Against this, Justice Jackson argued:

Our public school, if not the product of Protestantism, at least is more consistent with it than with the Catholic culture and scheme of values. It is a relatively recent development dating from about 1840. It is organized on the premise that secular education can be isolated from all religious teaching so that the school can inculcate all needed temporal knowledge and also maintain a strict and lofty neutrality as to religion. The assumption is that after the individual has been instructed in worldly wisdom he will be better fitted to choose his religion. Whether such a disjunction is possible, and if possible whether it is wise, are questions I need not try to answer.⁸⁰

Here is the basic template of liberal neutrality. To be religiously neutral is to believe 1) that the secular realm can be "isolated" from all religious teaching, 2) that the secular realm is not per se incompatible with the existence of some kind of religious truth, and 3) that any religious truth must be compatible with

⁷⁹ *United States v. Ballard*, 322 U.S. 78, 87 (U.S. 1944).

⁸⁰ *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 21 (U.S. 1947).

the self-contained nature of the secular realm. This is why the individual will be “better fitted to choose his religion” after he has been “instructed in worldly wisdom,” because the secular realm is the context in which religious truth is to be understood.

These are the premises of liberal neutrality. What the *Alleghany* Court characterized as the distinction between the secular and the atheistic, and what the *Grove* Court characterized as the distinction between the non-religious and the anti-religious, is *the distinction between the immanent frame itself and its closed interpretation*. To be non-religious is to posit the immanent frame. To be anti-religious is to posit that the immanent frame is all that there is. And one can do the former without also doing the latter. This is why the “secular” can have a dual meaning. There can be a distinction between the process of secularization and secularism as a body of anti-religious thought because the “secular” refers both to a transformation of our self-understanding from porous selves beholding charged objects to buffered ones beholding the immanent frame *and* to one position *within* the immanent frame. The religiously neutral state does not adopt a position within the immanent frame. But it does endorse the immanent frame itself, which is what *defines* the religion toward which it proclaims its neutrality.

As we saw, the *Smith* plaintiffs had complained that the contested textbooks noted the availability of social workers, counselors, and psychiatrist to assist students with life’s difficulties but made no mention of the availability of ministers, rabbis, and priests. The Court of Appeals disagreed and criticized Judge Hand for misinterpreting “the establishment clause requirement of ‘lofty neutrality’ on the part of the public schools” as “an affirmative obligation to speak about religion.” But had the textbook enumerated only ministers, rabbis, and priests in the class of helping professionals, then a court would presumably have required mention of these clergypersons’ secular analogues—social workers, counselors, and psychiatrists—to save the constitutionality of the passage, which would otherwise have to be construed as promoting religion over non-religion. So the Establishment Clause can clearly generate an affirmative obligation to speak about *non-religion*—to speak about social workers, counselors, and psychiatrists. But is this not an arbitrary double-standard that betrays latent hostility to religion? Why should the failure to mention rabbis, ministers, and priests be judged less exclusionary of religious believers than the failure to mention social workers, counselors, and psychiatrists is exclusionary of non-believers? Why does excluding of the religious version of something *not* operate to the detriment of the religious in the way that excluding the secular version of something is presumed to operate to the detriment of the secular?

The explanation lies in the immanent frame. If the secular is understandable on its own terms, without reference to its possible place in a religious cosmology, then the services of psychologists,

psychiatrists, social workers, and counselors carry an equal value for religious and non-religious students alike, who will both encounter “secular” problems that can be addressed in a secular fashion. These problems may create additional religious difficulties for religious students, but then they are free to seek out priests, ministers, and rabbis on their own. So long as the state is not actively discouraging recourse to them, the mere failure to promote them is not anti-religious hostility, because believers and non-believers alike occupy the secular sphere in equal measure. *This* is the hidden premise that quietly guides liberals’ understanding of religious neutrality, what allows them to see the secular as a neutral sphere that benignly puts religious questions out of play.

If conservatives reject what liberals uphold as religious neutrality, this, then, is because they reject the immanent frame, reject the notion that “secular education can be isolated from all religions teaching” as Justice Jackson says. For as they understand it, worldly wisdom and religious wisdom are but two different facets of a single underlying order—not two spheres, with proper entry into the one depending on satisfactory achievement in the other. They may wish to study “secular” subjects like the laws of physics. But they wish to do so according to a pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular, an understanding wherein these laws’ constancy manifest divine beneficence rather than potentially godless materialism—the risk generated by the immanent frame. Since even worldly education must carry a religious or anti-religious valence according to whether its place in a broader religious order is acknowledged, the pretense that temporal knowledge can be developed in disregard of, but without prejudice to, an “eternal frame” must be dismissed as a secular humanist ruse. Far from representing neutrality, the cultivation of purely temporal knowledge constitutes a stance of worldly arrogance that sinfully denies the dependence of the lesser on the greater—an “anti-religious” outcome if ever there was one. If religious conservatives believe that genuine neutrality requires neutrality, not only between religion and anti-religion, but also between religion and non-religion, this is because their pre-modern sensibility recognizes no clear line between the non-religious and the anti-religious. For it is only the religious that prevents the non-religious from devolving into the anti-religious. Whereas secular concerns can safely be classified as “non-religious” within the modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and secular, they threaten to devolve into the “anti-religious” within the pre-modern one to the extent their proper relationship to the eternal is overlooked. This is why the *Smith* plaintiffs believed that religious neutrality requires that secular perspectives be supplemented by religious ones—and can therefore generate an affirmative obligation to speak about religion.

The mayor of Pawtucket, the site of *Lynch v. Donnelly*, avowed that he had promoted the nativity scene as part of a crusade to "keep 'Christ' in Christmas"⁸¹ Seen from within the immanent frame, this is an aggressive theocratic agenda the purpose of which is to privilege the religious over the non-religious, to privilege one interpretation of the immanent frame over another. But seen from outside the immanent frame, from within the pre-modern understanding of the secular's relationship to the religious, this crusade was a *defensive* action the purpose of which was to prevent non-religion from devolving into anti-religion. For this is what must happen to the extent the secular aspects of Christmas come to overshadow its religious ones. And liberal neutrality facilitates this overshadowing, the overshadowing of the City of God by the City of Man. And this is why religious conservatives must, given their cosmological orientation, feel besieged by a "war on Christmas." The secular cannot represent neutrality as between theism and atheism for the pre-modern consciousness because the secular assumes a theistic or atheistic meaning according to whether its relation to the religious or eternal is recognized, and the secularization of the Christmas season undermines just this recognition. As Taylor puts it, tracts of secular time were for pre-moderns "coloured by their placing in relation to higher times,"⁸² which "gathered, assembled, reordered, punctuated profane, ordinary time."⁸³ And this gathering and assembling is precisely what liberal neutrality preempts, because approaching the secular as a self-contained realm is of the very essence of irreligion within the pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular.

Liberals do not understand how religious conservatives can describe the secular as some kind of alien orthodoxy when they themselves engage in all manner of secular activities. But this incomprehension is the result of liberals' own ethnocentricity. What liberals see as the conservative contradiction of dismissing the secular as an alien orthodoxy while engaging in secular activities without inhibition is in the eye of the liberal beholder, because what seems like inconsistent conduct is in fact the consistent application of a pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. Whether a religious conservative is permitted to engage in a secular activity without making some kind of accompanying religious affirmation is a function of the particular relationship between the religious and the secular in the context at hand, the extent to which and way in which secular time has been "punctuated" or "imbricated" by higher time. Where there is imbrication is profound, as in Christmas, the secular will become anti-religious if not accompanied by a religious affirmation. Where the imbrication is shallower, as in much of day-to-day life, such affirmation can be dispensed with without

⁸¹ *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 726 (U.S. 1984).

⁸² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pg. 58-59.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pg. 54.

the risk of anti-religious devolution—which is why religious conservatives can convey “secular messages of encouragement” without lapsing into irreligion. What liberals see as religious conservatives’ disingenuous equivocation between two plainly distinct sense of the secular is just the logical reflection of the latter’s cosmological orientation.

Religious believers who have been modernized and liberalized accept the immanent frame and so can distinguish the immanent frame itself from its atheistic interpretation. This is why they can accept liberal neutrality as genuine. But from *outside* the immanent frame, the immanent frame itself must show up as anti-religious, because to see the temporal world as self-sufficient or self-contained is of the very essence of sin. The “religion of secularism” that worries conservatives refers, not to the negation of the religious, but to the modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. *This was the orthodoxy to which Justice Kennedy was objecting in Alleghany, a secularized iteration of the concept of sin itself.*

Religious conservatives cannot but see the secularism promoted by the Left in this way, just as the Left cannot but misunderstand why they do so. A “religion of secularism” must appear oxymoronic once the secular is defined as that sphere of life in which theological questions are simply not implicated. Atheism is a viewpoint about the truth of a religious belief. By contrast, secularism is a viewpoint on when such judgments should and should not be relevant to what we do. And so conservatives anxious about a religion of secularism seem guilty of a gross category error. But this judgment is a manifestation of the buffered identity and its epistemological framework, which are what permit liberals to see religion and anti-religion as rival hypothesis about which the state need take no position. And this disengagement is a liberal privilege. For the porous self of pre-modernity, writes Taylor, “the prospect of rejecting God does not involve retiring to the safe redoubt of the buffered self, but rather chancing ourselves in the field of [spirit] forces without him. Practically our only recourse can be to seek another protector; and in this case the most likely candidate is his arch-enemy, Satan.”⁸⁴ For pre-moderns, atheism is not a position one might either accept or reject, but rather *a direction in which one might fall*. This falling away is an ever-present possibility that can be held at bay only by holding fast to the eternal, and this is precisely what liberal neutrality prevents religious conservatives from doing. The fact that the state is not formally *endorsing* atheism is little consolation to them, because atheism is what it *creates*.

Religious conservatives are culturally oppressed because they are condemned to live in a world in which grievances that follow *logically* from their cosmological orientation will always be dismissed as

⁸⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 41.

obvious category errors by the dominant dispensation. But what is a category error from within a modern perspective is, from within the pre-modern one, a cultural artifice of the buffered identity. For the distinctions that secular liberals accuse conservatives of disregarding are distinctions that only the buffered self can cognize. The enchanted world of the porous self, writes Taylor, “shows a perplexing absence of certain boundaries” which seem essential in the disenchanted world of buffered selves and “minds.” And it is the relative absence of these boundaries—between the mind and matter, the supernatural and the natural, the religious and the secular—that explains why conservatives do not accept distinctions that seem natural to liberals. The *Grove* plaintiffs’ “difficulty,” was not ultimately “analytical,” as that court characterized it, but rather existential and cosmological. The problem was not deeply held beliefs, but something deeper than deeply held beliefs, cosmological orientation, their visceral sense of themselves as agents.

Religious conservatives’ apprehensions about the connivance of a small coterie of secular humanists whose invisible tentacles have seized all major institutions may seem outlandish and conspiratorial. But the conspiracy theories are just distorted anthropomorphizations of religious conservatives’ visceral sense that they are culturally oppressed by an alien and alienating cosmological orientation. They are culturally oppressed, not by the secular, but by the modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. Ravi Zacharias complains

The California Supreme Court proved it has little problem with the state endorsing a religion, even forcing religious beliefs down its citizen’s throats, provided the religion is secular humanism. On March 1, 2004, the Court ruled that Catholic Charities of Sacramento must comply with the statute requiring California employers to include contraception coverage in their employee healthcare plans. Under the Women’s Contraceptive Equity Act of 2000, only religious employers are excluded. The Court had no problem rationalizing its decision, saying that since the Catholic Charities provides services that are secular in nature, such as counseling, immigration services, and low-income housing, for people of all faiths, it is not a religious employer. One would think that the politically correct California court would applaud the pluralistic attitude of the charity in making its services available to non-Catholics. Instead it used the charity’s tolerance to punish it.”⁸⁵

The religion of “secular humanism” being forced down citizens’ throats was the modern understanding of the secular and its relationship to the religious, the immanent frame. For it was this that permitted the Court to conclude that the religious status of the Catholic Charities was somehow compromised by its secular activities. Correlatively, Zacharias’s incredulity before this argument reflects his pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. As he and other religious conservatives saw it, the provision of counseling, immigration services, and low income housing to

⁸⁵ David Limbaugh, *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2004), pg. 363.

persons of all faith is just the secular component of a religious mission, the church acting in its capacity as the “secular clergy,” as it were. These services were indeed secular, but the secular derives its meaning from the religious. And this is why the Catholic Charities remains a religious employer notwithstanding the secular nature of its services. These services may not have promoted religion *qua* religious belief. But they did promote religion as a total way of being, religion as something that exists not only in the mind but also in the world. And it was this that the “politically correct” California Supreme Court refused to acknowledge when it distinguished between the religious and the secular according to the parameters of the immanent frame. Here as elsewhere, what conservatives condemn as political correctness refers to the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, for these are what impose the immanent frame.

Liberals’ sense that religious conservatives are prepared to make whatever transparently disingenuous arguments are necessary in order to privilege their religion is *the natural and predictable outcome of interposing modern interpretive categories on a pre-modern sensibility*. *McCreary County v. ACLU* addressed the constitutionality of Ten Commandment displays that two Kentucky counties had prominently installed in their courthouses. The Ten Commandments originally stood alone. But the displays had been modified after the lawsuit was brought in order to provide the Ten Commandments with a secular setting of other historically significant legal documents, the expectation being that these would eliminate the inference that the display’s primary purpose was religious rather than secular (just as the presence of secular or Jewish holiday displays might alter the message being broadcast by a nativity scene). And these embellishments satisfied Justice Scalia, who concluded that “when the Ten Commandments appear alongside other documents of secular significance in a display devoted to the foundations of American law and government, the context communicates that the Ten Commandments are included, not to teach their binding nature as a religious text, but to show their unique contribution to the development of the legal system.”⁸⁶

But writing for the Court, Justice Souter argued that this interpretation of the display’s meaning was belied by the fact that the documents which purported to provide the Ten Commandments with a secularizing context—and thus to transform them from attempts at religious proselytization into one element of legal history—were all pervaded by theistic references.⁸⁷ Theistic references alone do not make a document a religious text. But the fact that these references were the displays’ unifying theme when combined with the displays’ history gave the lie to the pretense that their purpose was the secular one of acknowledging the religious historical antecedents of Kentucky’s laws. Exasperated with the

⁸⁶ *McCreary County v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844 (U.S. 2005).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 870.

counties' argument that the later embellishments to the Ten Commandments removed their original religious purpose, Justice Souter dismissed these embellishments as a "trivial rationalization,"⁸⁸ a mere "excuse" to promote a "religious point of view."⁸⁹ "No reasonable observer," Souter inveighed, could "swallow the claim that the Counties had cast off the objective so unmistakable in the earlier displays."⁹⁰ For "[i]f the observer had not thrown up his hands, he would probably suspect that the Counties were simply reaching for any way to keep a religious document on the walls of courthouses constitutionally required to embody religious neutrality."⁹¹

But the disingenuousness that Souter believes he detects is eliminated within the pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. To the extent the secular is but one sphere within a broader religious cosmology, the American historical documents with which the Ten Commandments were embellished can indeed be seen as providing the Ten Commandments with a secularizing context notwithstanding these documents' common religious themes. The historical documents are "secular" in the sense that they exist at a certain remove from the transcendent dispensation that brought them into being. But like everything in existence, they originate out of God and derive their ultimate meaning from their relationship to him. To say that the embellishments are secular is just to say that they originate less directly from God than did the Ten Commandments, just as the parish priest's connection to God is less direct and unqualified than the ascetic monk's.

The defendants, then, were not issuing "trivial rationalizations" or "reaching for any way" to circumvent the requirements of religious neutrality, but merely conceiving of the secular in accordance with a pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. And this was simply a function of their cosmological orientation. Correlatively, Justice Souter's conviction that the defendants were arguing in bad faith was the direct consequence of his "secular humanism"—his modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. It was only because he first divided the religious and the secular as he did that he was compelled to conclude that the defendants were seeking to as it were "disguise" the religious in the secular. But there was no such disguising within the pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular, because the two do not function as "alternatives" the way they do within the modern understanding of that relationship. Lacking the ultimate in sophistication, liberals see conservatives through the lens of the latter and so

⁸⁸ Ibid., pg. 859.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pg. 869.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pg. 872.

⁹¹ Ibid., pg. 873.

cannot but see disingenuousness, which is why religious conservatives cannot but feel culturally oppressed by liberalism.

* * *

From the beginning, our question has concerned whether the principles of liberalism can be plausibly appropriated by conservatism. And we can now see that conservative claims of cultural oppression raise this challenge in the Establishment Clause context as well, because they are essentially demanding the kind of pluralism that can accommodate their pre-modern sensibilities, which is precisely what liberal neutrality withholds. Along with Justice Brennan, liberals insist that public schools train “American citizens in an atmosphere free of parochial, divisive, or separatist influences of any sort.”⁹² And the immanent frame is one such influence. If liberals cannot recognize this, the reason is that every dominant dispensation will define “divisive” in relation to itself, will erect an ideology that will look natural, or as it is now put, “neutral,” from the *inside*. Justice Brennan’s facially benign admonition obscures the fundamental question of what qualifies as parochial, divisive, or separatist, and whether it is possible to answer this question without being parochial, divisive, or separatist. Liberalism defines these dangers as whatever transgresses against the immanent frame, which has been identified with the “neutral.” But this would not be the first time in history in which the line between the parochial and the non-parochial has been misidentified. America’s Protestants could once bring themselves to believe, against the objections of Catholics, that the ecclesiastically unsupervised reading of the King James Bible in public schools qualified as a non-sectarian endeavor, and so it is hardly beyond the realm of possibility that today’s secular liberals are engaging in a disingenuousness of a similarly grand scale, a disingenuousness that would be obvious from a more cosmopolitan perspective. The mutation counter-narrative is that more cosmopolitan perspective.

If the Protestants of the 19th Century School Wars could believe that the ecclesiastically unsupervised reading of the Bible was a non-sectarian endeavor, rather than a privileging of Protestantism over Catholicism, this was because they understood Scripture as the common core of all Christianity, as that constant upon which everything else is a derivation. Catholicism’s distinctive interpretations were merely its gloss on this common core, and one that could be effectuated outside of school hours. In hindsight, this strikes us as a transparent rationalization for Protestant sectarianism, which we in our cosmopolitanism can recognize as such. But do liberals not effect a similar distortion in assuming that the

⁹²*School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 241-42 (U.S. 1963) (Brennan, J., concurring).

immanent frame is the common core of our humanity, when it has plainly been rejected by a great many people, who refuse to adapt their religion to that frame? Just as the Catholic refused to recognize clerical exegesis as something that merely “supplements” the individualistic religion of personal Biblical exegesis, so neither does the conservative claimant of cultural oppression recognize the religious dimension of things as something that merely supplements the secular one. This is why he rejects liberal neutrality as fraudulent. Liberalism offers neutrality between the religious and the secular *within* the modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. But the only neutrality that might satisfy the claimants is neutrality *between* the modern and pre-modern understandings of this relationship. And this liberalism always withholds.

4. Investing in Religion

The liberal may respond to all this by arguing that while conservatives’ pre-modern cosmological orientation may well *explain* their rejection of liberal neutrality, it hardly suffices to *justify* that rejection. For as the above analysis clarifies, that rejection arises out of a particular theological worldview, the pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. The secularist orthodoxy of which Justice Kennedy accused the *Alleghany* Court’s is, as we saw, a secularized iteration of *sin*. And so this is hardly a neutral measure of liberal neutrality. In short, what liberals condemn as the surreptitious imperiousness of religious conservatives is not dissolved by the latter’s pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular. For that understanding is itself an imperious theological imposition, which has simply been disguised in the secular lingo of resistance to orthodoxy. The foregoing analysis, then, would appear to confirm everything liberals had suspected.

However, the mutation counter-narrative reveals that liberals’ understanding of religious neutrality is no less tainted by its religious origins. On the subtraction account, the immanent frame is just the outcome of lopping off certain confining horizons—like a teleological understanding of the universe—which had hitherto suppressed certain underlying features of human nature, like the capacity to view the world non-anthropocentrically and so pursue our autonomous desires unobstructed by illusory teleologies. But on the mutation counter-narrative, the immanent frame is the final outcome of a *religious* movement. For it was by way of a certain conception of divinity—a god of unqualified transcendence not even minimally embedded in nature—that Religious Reform gradually induced the development of the buffered self and its capacity for beholding the immanent frame. Thus, while the pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular is indeed theological, the modern understanding of that relationship is in its own way no less so, because it grew out of, and

incorporates within itself, a particular understanding of divinity. As we will now see, this has profound implications for the meaning of religious neutrality.

* * *

Mark Lilla argues that Anglo-American thinking about religion has been defined by a “Great Separation” paradigm. Hobbes, who first introduced that paradigm, believed that gods were originally adopted as solace for, and adjuncts in a struggle against, an uncontrollable and unpredictable nature. Monotheism then developed out of polytheism as a superior mechanism of control in our confrontation with ill-understood natural causation. But the God of monotheism then became a source of fear and anxiety in his own right, aggravating the fear and anxiety caused by nature itself. Out of these apprehensions, people came to adopt “strange visions and even stranger superstitions about appeasing God.” And this need to appease divinity was what turned religion into a source of political strife and bloodshed.⁹³ Hobbes’s successors in the liberal tradition were not all as alarmed by religion’s dangers. But they all shared Hobbes’s basic understanding of why religion exists and what it does. The Great Separation paradigm may be viewed as a variant of the subtraction account, because it casts religion as a confining horizon that impedes us in our true ends. The paradigm assumes what Leszek Kolakowski terms the “instrumentalist conception of the sacred,” according to which “religious beliefs proper are reducible to practical instruments, applied to spheres that are subject to chance and not susceptible to human influence,” a “means of imposing order where control is not possible.”⁹⁴ In other words, religion is an attempt to do the impossible. And it is only a short step from this to the conclusion that it is motivated only by fear and ignorance.

But Lilla observes that philosophers on the European continent proceeded from a very different intellectual starting point. Though Kant and Hegel both dismissed the claims of revealed religion, they also “believed that the tenacious hold of revelation on Western consciousness must point to something about the human mind, which could have important implications for politics.” Both believed that religion was, at its deepest level “no alien imposition on the ignorant by self-interested priests” but rather an “expression of the mind’s very essence.”⁹⁵ They believed that earlier empiricists like Hobbes, Locke, and Hume operated with “a crude notion of how the human mind works” that overlooked how the “urge to metaphysics is tied up with all our rational faculties.”⁹⁶ Man does not simply use religion to achieve ends

⁹³ Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), pg. 79.

⁹⁴ Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pg. 65.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 220.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 135.

that could be pursued in other ways, for he is fundamentally “a religious animal seeking psychological and social reconciliation.”⁹⁷

Lilla argues that this alternative starting point raises a basic challenge for the Anglo-American tradition, whose conception of religion cannot recognize this layer of human experience:

But if their anthropological assumptions regarding ignorance and fear were false or even limited, the political lessons drawn from them might also be false. What would happen to modern ideas of sovereignty, individual rights, separation of church and state, limited government, and consent if different anthropological assumptions had been made? How would the Great Separation have been changed by recognizing greater psychological complexity behind religious belief?⁹⁸

The mutation counter-narrative constitutes a response to this question. For it is an attempt to present a systematic alternative to the anthropological assumptions underpinning the Great Separation paradigm and the subtraction account. The mutation counter-narrative conceptualizes religion, not as an instrument for satisfying human purposes, but in terms of its role in the development of human *purposiveness*—the development of human agency. Religion is not, in the first instance, an expedient of the self but the expression of a tension *within* the self. This is the tension between the porous and buffered layers of human consciousness, between human beings’ ineluctable immersion in nature as animals and their equally ineluctable but initially implicit and unarticulated sense of themselves as autonomous agents who can “step back” from, and thereby transcend, mere nature. This is why religion properly understood can speak to the “mind’s very essence” as Lilla says, because it is the means through which the human mind has developed in the direction of the modern liberal identity, which is now understood to express this essence. Religion has always been important, not merely as a set of cosmological speculations, but as a social reality from out of which human interiority develops. It is not in the first place a private belief, but a set of socially embedded understandings that inculcate certain forms of agency while discouraging others.

The subtraction account must cast primitive animism as religion in its quintessential role as a reaction to fear and ignorance. After all, what else but these could inspire people to impute agency and consciousness to inanimate objects like trees, rivers, and mountains? But on the mutation counter-narrative, this inability to distinguish between mind and matter is just the corollary of human nature’s default porousness. Animism reflected the impoverished state, not only of our knowledge, but just as importantly of our *interiority*. Ludwig Feuerbach writes,

Nature is to man originally, i.e., where he regards her with a religious eye, rather an object of his own qualities, a personal, living, feeling being. Man originally does not distinguish himself from

⁹⁷ Ibid., pg. 221.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pg. 111.

Nature, nor consequently Nature from himself, therefore the sensations which any object in Nature excites in him appear to him immediately as qualities of the object. The beneficial, good sensations and effects are caused by good and benevolent Nature, the bad painful sensations, by an evil being, or at least by Nature in its state of evil disposition, of malevolence, of wrath. Thus man involuntarily and unconsciously, *i.e.*, necessarily—though this necessity is only a relative and historical one—transforms the essence of Nature into a feeling, *i.e.*, a subjective human being.⁹⁹

Animism was not just an attempt to explain natural causality in the absence of more scientific methods, but more fundamentally a natural reflection of primitive human consciousness which, lacking a sense of deep interiority, discerned agency outwardly rather than inwardly. Not being even minimally buffered, primitive man could in no way “step back” and distinguish his inner life from the natural environment. For his sense of agency consisted in nothing more than a sense of responsiveness to the spirit forces all about him. This is why religion in archaic society was, as Taylor says, “everywhere,” something that “was interwoven with everything else, and in no sense constituted a separate ‘sphere’ of its own.”¹⁰⁰ While medieval Christianity “blurred” the distinction between the religious and the secular, animism allowed for *no* distinction at all between the two, as they permeated each other to the point of being indistinguishable. The “free exercise” of religion would have been wholly unintelligible in this world, not because it was forbidden politically, but because it was unavailable *as a concept*. Religion having been identified with Being itself, there was nothing to be exercised, because there existed no autonomous agent to undertake the exercising. It was, in a sense, religion that exercised itself on man, “pulling” him into action by virtue of a willfulness that he did not experience as his own.

The subtraction account and Great Separation paradigm calls on us to view the development of polytheism along the same lines as animism, as a more systematic but equally mistaken expedient through which pre-scientific humans sought to cope with fear and ignorance. But on the mutation counter-narrative, polytheism is, as Lilla characterizes Hegel’s view, “the first stirrings of human self-assertion against fate.”¹⁰¹ Polytheism is not just another failed early attempt to explain what science has in fact explained, but the human organism’s first efforts to *wrest an inner life*, to rescue consciousness from its immediate submersion in an animistic environment that preempted this inner life. Only to the extent that consciousness is not immediately overwhelmed by animistic spirit forces inhering in every rock, tree, and river can it step back into itself and acquire some sense of its separateness from nature. And this is what polytheism first facilitated. Polytheistic man remained beholden to the influence of multiple, often capricious deities, who could in various ways possess him, perhaps infusing him with godlike courage or

⁹⁹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Religion*, trans. Alexander Loos (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), pg. 26.

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 2.

¹⁰¹ Lilla, *Stillborn God*, pg.188.

strength—or with madness if he provoked their ire. But he no longer found himself possessed by animistic forces that ubiquitously pervaded his immediate environment and perennially “swallowed up” his sense of interiority.

The development of monotheism out of polytheism, then, must be understood as yet a further stage in the development of this interiority. Monotheism is not just a theory but something that has shaped the nature of human consciousness. Feuerbach writes that it is only where “the earth is depopulated of Gods, where the Gods ascend into heaven and change from real beings to imagined ones” that “men have space and room for themselves without any restraint as men and put themselves forward as such.”¹⁰² The heavenly God of monotheism allows humans to “put themselves forward as such” because he allows the world to become disenchanted of spirits. And it is the progressive disenchantment of the world, initiated by Judaism but not fully effectuated until the work of Reform and providential deism, that facilitated the development of the human interiority that liberalism mistakes for timeless human nature. The exorcism of religion progressively strips the natural world of will and consciousness in the name of divine sovereignty that, standing at ever greater remove from the operations of our immediate environments, will not deign to charge objects, places, and times with divinity. And it is this disenchantment of the world that stimulates the development of *human* will and consciousness. For it is only by becoming subjected to a single, invisible law-giving deity that the human organism becomes liberated from its own propensity to posit multiple capricious ones, and so becomes positioned to internalize the idea of law and then understand itself as its own law-giver, the autonomous individual celebrated by liberalism, which fails to recognize its own religious predicates. Madison wrote in his Memorial and Remonstrance that “[t]he Religion . . . of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man.”¹⁰³ But the mutation counter-narrative tells us that is only by virtue of religion itself, and specifically the emergence of monotheism, that people came to have a “conscience” in the first place. Our understanding of religion has been shaped by religion, because religion has created the human innerness presupposed by this understanding.

But why, it may be asked, should this protracted historical development have been necessary in the first place? Why is the interiority of the buffered self not simply a given of human nature? Philosopher Daniel Dennett offers the beginnings of an explanation in his suggestion that human beings’ trans-cultural tendency to believe in supernatural agents may be the side-effect of an evolved disposition originating in

¹⁰² Feuerbach, *Essence of Religion*, pg. 41.

¹⁰³ Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments, 2 Writings of James Madison 183, 184 (G. Hunt ed. 1901)

our “hyper-active agent detection devices” (HADDs).¹⁰⁴ For obvious reasons, genes disposing us to over-suspect agency—when, say, hearing leaves ruffling behind us—would have carried greater adaptive value in the ancestral environment of our evolution than genes disposing us to under-suspect agency. It was more adaptive to be paranoid than to be eaten by a bear. This basic disposition to see agency operating behind the scenes even on the basis of minimal evidence might then have been cultivated in different ways by different cultures, first through animism and polytheism and then later through monotheism, forming the common biological basis for the world’s diverse religions, each of which channels our HADDs in its own distinct way. Speculative though this theory may be, it converges theoretically with the mutation counter-narrative, providing an evolutionary explanation for its starting premise that default human consciousness is forcefully submerged in its immediate environment, as first and foremost a conscious *of the world*, a consciousness directed outward with little capacity to turn back and take itself as the primary agent. And it is religion in its various permutations that first expresses but eventually counteracts this default condition, with monotheism channeling our HADDs in a way that would eventually liberate us from their imperatives.

This gradual historical process is why Lilla can write that Hegel’s philosophy of religion “assumed a necessary correlation between the development of human consciousness and how societies represent the divine-human relationship to themselves.”¹⁰⁵ Religion is the fulcrum of human self-consciousness because it provides people with the “permission” to develop a level of interiority that does not exist naturally. God is, in a sense, the mirror image of our own consciousness. God does not just allow us to explain what we could not otherwise explain; he also allows us to *be* what we could not otherwise be. Religion is not just a set of beliefs about the universe, but a form of *training* for what we have come to recognize as the distinctively human. Hence Hegel’s claim that understood philosophically God is simply the “Idea of freedom.”¹⁰⁶ God is the idea of freedom because it is the idea of God as it progressively unfolded through Western history that permitted the development of the modern liberal identity and its disengaged innerness. We can only understand the mind by understanding the process of its development. But the development of the mind is concomitantly the development of religion, which symbolically articulates an initially unconscious yearning to transcend our merely animal immersion in nature, cultivating this aspiration by cultivating the idea of God as an absolute transcendence.

¹⁰⁴ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Penguin, 2007), pg 109.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. pg. 229.

¹⁰⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953), pg 25.

This is the greater psychological complexity in which the Great Separation paradigm is wanting. And it is this complexity that explains why the religious neutrality problem has proven so intractable and why religious conservatives do not believe they are receiving a fair shake. Liberal neutrality prohibits the state from endorsing any religious or anti-religious beliefs. But the mutation counter-narrative reveals that the neutrality at issue is not neutrality between different beliefs, but between different “stages” in the interiorization of human consciousness, between different cosmological orientations, all of which are equally religious in the context of that narrative. Religion does not presuppose belief because it already transpires prior to belief in the very structure of consciousness itself. And this is the root cause of disagreements about religious neutrality, a root cause that cannot be understood in purely epistemological terms, because the true bone of contention is supra-epistemological. As with everything else that brings the liberal elites into collision with conservative claimants of cultural oppression, the source of the conflict is not deeply held beliefs but something deeper than deeply held beliefs.

Justice Brennan observed that the “intent of the Framers with respect to the public display of nativity scenes is virtually impossible to discern primarily because the widespread celebration of Christmas did not emerge in its present form until well into the 19th century.” One reason for this was that the Puritans had always opposed the public celebration of Christmas as “a ‘Popish’ practice lacking any foundation in Scripture.”¹⁰⁷ The first “War on Christmas,” it turns out, was waged on religious rather than secular grounds, and by a very different group of “east coast elites” than has now assumed responsibility for it. Is it mere coincidence that the Puritans and the lawyers of the ACLU should both be opposed to publicly sponsored nativity scenes? The conclusion that it is indeed just coincidence may seem obvious. After all, the religious offense that a nativity scene might cause any latter-day Puritans would be of no concern for the ACLU. The Puritans were opposed to all such displays and on theological grounds. By contrast, the ACLU opposes only state-sponsored ones and then only on constitutional grounds. There may be a narrow convergence of opinion on the specific question of government-sponsored nativity scenes. But it would appear that the underlying motivations could not be more different.

This, however, is to conceptualize the problem within the epistemological framework, in terms of the theological beliefs that are or are not in play. But the problem can alternatively be conceptualized on the level of cosmological orientation, in terms of the religious evolution tracked by the mutation counter-narrative. And with the question thus conceptualized, the answer to our question becomes more complicated. To be sure, the Puritans’ motivations were religious while the ACLU’s are secular. But both

¹⁰⁷ *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 720-21 (1984) (J. Brennan, dissenting).

are animated by similar cosmological orientations, similar understandings of the *relationship between the religious and the secular*. This is why their convergence is no coincidence.

Though the Puritans' objections to nativity scenes were theological rather than constitutional, they could have been satisfied with Justice Brennan's diagnosis of the problem. Disputing the *Lynch* Court's characterization of the nativity scene at issue as "a mere representation of a 'particular historic event,'" Justice Brennan insisted that it was rather the "mystical re-creation of an event that lies at the heart of Christian faith." Far from being a religiously neutral representation of fact, the "essence of the crèche's symbolic purpose and effect is to prompt the observer to experience a sense of simple awe and wonder appropriate to the contemplation of one of the central elements of Christian dogma -- that God sent His Son into the world to be a Messiah."¹⁰⁸ This is just as objectionable to the Puritan as to the secularist. God may have sent Jesus to earth as a Messiah. But for the Puritan, this is the object of faith, of a faith that must constantly struggle to renew itself against our fallen nature, and so a faith that may not evade that responsibility by taking refuge in the mystical promptings of nativity scenes and other charged objects. For to receive the mystical "prompt" described by Brennan is to insult the unqualified transcendence of God, who declines to embed his divinity in space and time, including in nativity scenes, and rather seeks to raise us beyond such idolatry and paganism.

Though we can define the Puritans according to the content of their theology, we can also define them according to the cosmological orientation that accompanies that theology. And thus understood, Puritanism is the forerunner of modern secularism. For it was the work of Religious Reform that first cultivated the kind of consciousness that made secularism possible, the buffered identity no longer beholden to an enchanted world of spirit forces—which Justice Brennan was fearing could be undermined the nativity scene and its mystical promptings. The immanent frame first developed as a religious aspiration, a way of paying homage to the true God. And what liberals uphold as religion neutrality exacts an analogous form of homage when it promotes a cosmological orientation that first developed through Religious Reform. We will now see why.

* * *

Writing for the Court in *Lee v. Weismann*, Justice Kennedy had argued that formally voluntary prayers at public school graduation ceremonies were unconstitutional on account of the psychological coercion they could exert on non-believers. On the other hand, Nathan Bishop Middle School had

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pg. 711 (J. Brennan, dissenting).

defended its traditional practice of sponsoring non-sectarian graduation prayers with the argument that these were “an essential part of these ceremonies because for many persons an occasion of this significance lacks meaning if there is no recognition, however brief, that human achievements cannot be understood apart from their spiritual essence.”¹⁰⁹ Nathan Bishop Middle School thus argued in defense of a pre-modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular, wherein the secular, temporal order cannot be conceived in abstraction from the eternal order that maintains it in being. While this did not overcome Justice Kennedy’s worries about psychological coercion, he did acknowledge its weight, averring that the decision had been rendered difficult by the fact that “these short prayers and others like them at graduation exercises are of profound meaning to many students and parents throughout this country who consider that due respect and acknowledgment for divine guidance and for the deepest spiritual aspirations of our people ought to be expressed at an event as important in life as a graduation.”¹¹⁰

But these spiritual aspirations did not win the sympathy of Justice Souter, who did not view the Court’s decision as a difficult one. Writing in concurrence, Justice Souter applied the endorsement test and concluded that these prayers were an unconstitutional endorsement, rather than the constitutional accommodation, of religion:

Religious students cannot complain that omitting prayers from their graduation ceremony would, in any realistic sense, “burden” their spiritual callings. To be sure, many of them invest this rite of passage with spiritual significance, but they may express their religious feelings about it before and after the ceremony. They may even organize a privately sponsored baccalaureate if they desire the company of like-minded students. Because they accordingly have no need for the machinery of the State to affirm their beliefs, the government’s sponsorship of prayer at the graduation ceremony is most reasonably understood as an official endorsement of religion and, in this instance, of theistic religion.¹¹¹

The religious students failed to show a genuine burden because whatever special religious meaning the graduation ceremony held for them could be acted upon elsewhere and at another time. The spiritual significance which they detected in the occasion was, after all, “invested” in it by the students themselves, who could therefore divest the situation of that significance and re-invest it elsewhere in a private meeting. And so no real burden is being imposed when the school puts an end to its tradition of performing benedictions. Had there been a genuine burden to relieve, the state’s sponsorship of the

¹⁰⁹ *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 596 (U.S. 1992).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 583-84.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 630.

prayer might have qualified as accommodation and so been consistent with religious neutrality. But given that there was none, it was just gratuitous largesse and therefore endorsement, the establishment of religion.

But is Justice Souter's argument from investment itself religiously neutral? Does it rest on secular or religious premises? That argument in fact admits of both interpretations. On the secular one, the spiritual significance discerned by the students may be legitimately described as an investment because natural science cannot recognize this significance as an intrinsic feature of graduation ceremony. Described naturalistically, the ceremony is just matter in motion—or perhaps the bonding ritual of large-brained primates. The intuition that the occasion carries an inherent (non-invested) spiritual significance is, like the intuition that color consists in something beyond light waves of various lengths, a species of anthropocentric projection—albeit one we have it within our power to restrain, which is what Souter was asking the students to do.

We already know what the alternative religious justification would have to look like: The spiritual significance of the graduation ceremony must have been invested into it by the students because God in his absolute sovereignty and unqualified transcendence would not deign to make that significance readily available to human beings in the form of charged objects—or as in *Lee* a charged occasion. To the extent the students experience the occasion as religiously “special,” this is because they have idolatrously invested the occasion with a meaning that the unqualified transcendence of God precludes it from having. To say that human achievements cannot be understood apart from their spiritual essence, as Nathan Bishop contended on behalf of its students, is already to speak too highly of those achievements—the achievements of fallen sinners. The spiritual significance can be divested and reinvested at will because that significance is in truth merely a contrivance of a human will that sinfully conflates itself with the divine will—which does not leave the genuine article lying about in the world at designated locations, like nativity scenes and middle school graduations. On this alternative religious interpretation, Justice Souter could not treat the prayers as a mere accommodation to religion because this would be to imply that the spiritual significance existed objectively in the world and thereby to endorse the golden calf that Nathan Bishop Middle School would make of its graduation ceremony.

A situation in which church/state separationism was defended on these religious grounds—as a form of deference to the unqualified transcendence of God—would clearly be unconstitutional. Yet the secularist dispensation is functionally equivalent to such a theocratic regime. And this is why whether one conceptualizes the argument naturalistically or theologically is ultimately irrelevant to religious conservatives' sense of grievance. They object, not to the arguments' intellectual foundation in one or

the other of these rationales, but to the cosmological orientation that both the religious and secular formulations express in their own way. The issue is not the religious or secular content of the argument, but the cosmological orientation that is implicit in the very possibility of making the argument.

This cosmological orientation is anathema to religious conservatives and their pre-modern sensibility. For the porous self of pre-modernity, writes Taylor,

Things can show up as the loci of spirits or forces, and they do so unreflectively, as a matter of immediate “experience”, because they are generally understood to do so. A powerful relic, from which I hope for the cure of a debilitating illness, doesn’t appear to me as just another bone, about which one might emit the hypothesis that touching it may have curative power. It is phenomenally filled with this power.¹¹²

Such a relic could not show up as merely another bone that might just turn out to be different because not only human achievements, but also things in general, could not be understood apart from their spiritual essence. This is why pre-moderns could entertain no distinction between the relic and the spiritual significance that Justice Souter believes can be acknowledged on one’s own time wherever one happens to be. And so too with the religious conservatives in *Weismann*, for whom the spiritual significance of the graduation ceremony was a “matter of immediate experience” and not the object of a hypothesis that can as easily be promulgated at another place and time. This was what made the ceremony a charged occasion. The students understood the spiritual significance they encountered as inherent to the fabric of things—as emanating from out of a “locus of spirits of forces”—rather than as the product of their own investments. The investment of spiritual significance having been made by God himself, they could hardly be required to divest that occasion of this significance—to peel it off from its physical substratum as it were—so as to reinvest it elsewhere. This was what made their burden real, precisely what Justice Souter refused to acknowledge.

Justice Souter frames his argument as a descriptive claim about the absence of any “realistic” religious burden. But this understanding of reality is the expression of a cosmological orientation. For it is only by having internalized the buffered identity and its ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity that one becomes positioned to recognize one’s investments as investments, and thereby assert control over them and not be burdened by them, religiously or otherwise. In insisting on a clean division between inner and outer, between one’s religious feelings and the vessels into which they have been poured, Justice Souter is impliedly endorsing this identity, imposing its disciplines and repressions as a normative regime. In declaring that there exists no “realistic” religious burden, he was implying that any burden felt by the students was one they would have to bear as the penalty to be paid for their failure

¹¹² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 324.

to realize the full agency powers of the buffered self, the penalty for their surrender to anthropocentricity, the “consolations of an enchanted world” and the “promptings of the senses.” It was this failure that caused the students to experience the graduation ceremony as they did, and this is not something that the “religiously neutral” state can reward. The students’ religion failed to respect the immanent frame, and so Justice Souter would not respect it.

The subtraction account represents the agency powers exhorted by Justice Souter as springing from the brute courage to discard the teleological illusions of pre-moderns, who lacked the psychological autonomy or epistemic savvy to distinguish matter and meaning and thereby direct their investments of spiritual significance in an autonomous fashion. Justice Souter’s demand that the students do so can therefore qualify as genuinely non-religious, because the ethos he is endorsing represents an essential human capacity, a human nature unhampered by heteronomous identification. It is something that can be described in purely negative terms, as what remains upon the casting off of illusion. To be sure, the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity may carry consequences for religion, as Justice Souter’s concurring opinion illustrates. But these consequences are being imposed in the name of basic human self-transparency rather than another religion. And so this ethos lacks any intrinsic religious meaning and is in this respect at least neutral toward religion.

But on the mutation counter-narrative, Justice Souter’s argument from investment is the sublimation and secularization of a religious ideal. The argument may be neutral about God’s existence. But it is not neutral about what God would have to be like if he exists. If graduation prayers could not possibly qualify as a mere accommodation of religion, this can only be because God, if he exists, is not the sort of deity who would leave spiritual significance lying about in the world at designated coordinates, but rather one who commands us to behold the world in a disenchanted fashion. Justice Souter’s argument is framed in secular terms. But the very ability to make the argument presupposes a consciousness which has been shaped historically by religiously-driven hostility toward enchantment and charged objects. Justice Souter was not endorsing the god of the Puritans, the god of unqualified transcendence. But he was endorsing the disenchanted *consciousness*, the cosmological orientation, that developed alongside faith in this God.

This legacy lives on in liberal attitudes toward religious conservatives, whose inability to distinguish investments from non-investments liberals see as the idolatrous alienation of essential human agency powers. Liberals now understand these powers to be a self-contained feature of liberated human nature, reason pure and simple. But they were first cultivated by religion, understood as a divine gift for whose neglect one would be answerable to God. And this genealogy is why liberals now attach a quasi-

religious significance to these powers and condemn as “fanatics” all who abscond from the responsibilities they impose. Where the traditional Protestant conscience sees idolatry, the secularist sees a kind of bad faith or false consciousness. But these are just alternative articulations of the regime of the buffered identity. Therein lies the conservative grievance. Where the religious reformers once felt themselves answerable to God for any failure to overcome idolatry, today’s religious conservatives are now told that they will be answerable to liberals, who have simply secularized a particular understanding of God into the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity.

Martin Buber defines “religion” as “the sum total of the customs and teaching articulated and formulated by the religiosity of a certain epoch in a people’s life.”¹¹³ On the other hand, “religiosity” itself is man’s “ever anew articulation and formulation of his feeling that, transcending his conditioned being yet bursting from its very core, there is something that is unconditioned.” Religiosity is the will “to realize the unconditioned through...action,” the transposition of the unconditioned “into the world of man.” What conservatives refer to as the “religion of secularism” is in fact best understood as the *religiosity* of secularism. The religion of secularism may lack any clearly delineated customs and teachings—Judge Hand’s efforts to discover them notwithstanding—but it does, like its religious predecessors, represent a will to realize the unconditioned through action. For it is the *will to realize the ideal of the buffered self*. The stance from which one can recognize spiritual significance as having been invested is not just a disinterested receptivity to things as they are, but rather a theistically-derived form of religious affirmation, what Nietzsche calls an “old love.” This is why liberal neutrality is less than neutral in the eyes of religious conservatives, whose own cosmological orientation is tied to a different understanding of divinity and thus precludes this kind of affirmation. David Limbaugh objects that “[j]ust the slightest nod to a religion will be enough to trigger an Establishment Clause violation.”¹¹⁴ Though surely inaccurate as a characterization of Supreme Court precedent, the complaint articulates the underlying logic of the endorsement test: Even a mere “nod” to religion is objectionable because that nod is concomitantly a *slight* to the god of unqualified transcendence as secularized by the immanent frame.

¹¹³ Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Schocken Books, 1967), pg. 80.

¹¹⁴ David Limbaugh, *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2004), pg. xii.

Justice Scalia observes that we “need not delve too far into modern popular culture to perceive a trendy disdain for deep religious conviction.”¹¹⁵ But this “trendy disdain” for religion is in fact but the latest iteration of a very longstanding trend. Lilla writes:

The pagans did not know, or would not hear, the word of the true God and therefore their analysis of religion did not apply to genuine faith. God revealed his word in the Bible to help man overcome his tendency toward such “religion.” Each of the biblical faiths sees itself as overcoming this human tendency, once and for all. Judaism portrays itself as the overcoming of Near Eastern paganism by God’s chosen nation; Christianity is the overcoming of Jewish ritualism and narcissism, bringing salvation to all nations; Protestantism is the overcoming of the “whore of Babylon,” which perpetuated pagan tendencies within the community of the faithful; Islam is the overcoming of infidelity to the only God and his prophet. We are not “religion,” says each of the biblical faiths: we are truth.¹¹⁶

These biblical dispensations can be seen as differentiated from each other and from paganism according to how they draw the line between the spiritual significance that inheres in the world and the spiritual significance which has merely been invested there. To lapse into paganism and idolatry—these always being relative qualities—is to mistake the latter for the former, to represent God as more immanent and so more qualified in his transcendence, more a part of the fabric of things, than is in fact the case. Just as the transcendence of a God of Israel was too qualified for Christianity, because too invested in Israel, so the transcendence of the God of the Catholic Church was too qualified for Protestantism, because too invested in that very Church. Judaism and Catholicism are deficient from the Protestant perspective because they have in the process of freeing themselves from the investments of pagans, articulated this freedom through hierarchies, laws, rituals, ethnic identifications etc., in which they subsequently became reinvested, thereby slipping back into the very blindness from which true monotheism was intended to liberate us.

Secular liberalism is but one further step in this historical development, one further extension of a *religious* logic. Secular liberalism does not say “we are not religion; we are truth.” But it does say “we are not religion; we are neutrality” or “we are not religion; we are non-exclusion.” And as with the earlier biblical dispensations, secular liberalism’s own self-interpretation is less than religiously neutral. For the mutation counter-narrative reveals Justice Souter’s *Lee* concurrence to be the secularization of the religious impulse described by Lilla, and also that impulse taken to its final conclusion. Secular liberalism draws the line between the religious and the non-religious as it does, not out of any culturally neutral lucidity, but because it represents the culmination of a historical process through which the self has

¹¹⁵ *Locke v. Davey*, 540 U.S. 712, 734 (U.S. 2004).

¹¹⁶ Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, pg. 68.

become more and more buffered, more and more disposed to see as “investments” what earlier dispensations approached as simple reality. And this disposition carries a religious meaning, not as a theological tenet, but as a cosmological orientation, in the self’s basic sense of its relationship to existence as a whole. Secular liberalism may understand itself as “non-religious.” But this self-understanding simply repeats what was a tendency of all earlier religion, the sense of having transcended religion “once and for all,” as Lilla says.

Conservative claimants of cultural oppression cannot accept secular liberalism as neutral because their under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative reveals it to be just a secularized and modernized outlet for the impulses that were once channeled by Religious Reform. Taylor observes:

It is a feature of the whole modern period... that social elites become detached from, even hostile to, much of popular culture, and attempt to make it over. One of the things they have frequently imposed is disenchantment, the suppression of “magic” and unofficial religion....

Elites can often have tremendous power to impose these changes; their very secession from the popular forms can destabilize them. It is in the very nature of religion in an enchanted world, as I have just mentioned, that it defines the practice not simply or even primarily of individuals, but of whole societies.

A religion of this kind is uniquely vulnerable to the defection of elites, since they are often in a position severely to restrict, if not to put an end altogether to the central collective rituals. If the king himself will no longer play his role, what can one do? Or if relics and statues of saints are burned, how go on drawing their power?

Reform from on top can thus put a brutal end to a great deal of popular religion, without necessarily putting anything in its place for many of the people concerned. And this was not only an end de facto, it could also be seen as a kind of refutation. For those who believed in the influences and forces residing in certain places and things, the very fact that they could be destroyed without terrible retribution seemed to indicate that their power had fled. In this way, the reformers carried on a practice which had already been used time and again to spread the faith. When St. Boniface felled the sacred oak groves of the pagan Germans, just this demonstration of effect was what was intended. And the missionaries who followed the Conquistadores in Mexico hastened to destroy the temples and cultures of the natives, with the same intention, and similar results.¹¹⁷

Secularism is not the subtraction of this religious past but its latest recapitulation, one more extension of the hostility toward enchantment that once assumed an overtly religious form. The locus of concern may now be middle school graduation ceremonies rather than statues of saints or pagan forests. But the pre-moderns of today, just like those of yesteryear, continue to defend “the central collective rituals,” continue to object that religion is not, as Justice Scalia puts it, a “purely personal avocation that can be indulged entirely in private.” The religious reformers of the early modern period sought to suppress popular religion—the religion of charged objects, times, and events—not simply in order to impose their own religious beliefs but, as importantly, in order to impose their own form of religious *consciousness*,

¹¹⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pg. 440.

the special dignity of the buffered self extricated from the enchanted world of pre-modernity. And this impulse continues today under the mantle of secularism. The opposition between religious conservatives and secular liberals is a reprise of what was originally an opposition between pre-modern and modern religion, between the more enfleshed religious orientation of non-elites and the more excarnated one of religious reformers. And this can in turn be seen as recapitulating an as yet older opposition between paganism and monotheistic hostility to idolatry. Seen in this light, religious conservatives have thus been thrust in the role of conquered pagan tribes being compelled to relinquish their charged objects (and events) to supervising missionaries—i.e., the secular liberals of the ACLU.

The epistemological framework—always a barrier to comprehending conservative claims of cultural oppression—prevents us from seeing this logic in coherence. As we have noted, conservative claimants of cultural oppression associate liberalism with a new paganism that turns this-worldly goods into the objects of what should be a strictly other-worldly devotion. But it is only along the axis of religious belief that secularists can qualify as the pagans, embracing as they do this-worldly or “man centered” objectives—like “social justice”—to the disregard of eternal ones. Along the axis of cosmological orientation, however, it is religious conservatives who are comparatively pagan. For it is they who embody the less disenchanted, less buffered consciousness that Christianity has always to various degrees associated with paganism. Failing to understand their own religion’s disenchanting tendencies, conservative claimants of cultural oppression must misconstrue as nihilistic those who are merely taking the logic of disenchantment a step further than they have. Failing to grasp this basic continuity, neither can they recognize that the arrogance and condescension of the liberal elites toward them is but a novel iteration of the arrogance and condescension that Christianity has traditionally meted out to various paganisms. What they dismiss as the uprooted, ad hoc religiosity of liberalism enjoys an internal coherence as an expression of these traditional impulses.

The epistemological framework and its focus on belief conceals this internal coherence and with this the internal coherence of conservative claims of cultural oppression, as an assertion of cosmological orientation. Justice Stewart complained that the majority had commanded the creation of “an atmosphere in which children are kept scrupulously insulated from any awareness that some of their fellows may want to open the school day with prayer, or of the fact that there exist in our pluralistic society differences of religious belief.”¹¹⁸ But the “atmosphere” to which Justice Stewart takes exception ultimately refers, not to any inaccurate estimates of religion’s social prevalence, but to the prestige of a

¹¹⁸ *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 316-17 (U.S. 1963) (Stewart, J, dissenting).

particular cosmological orientation, which was being privileged through the claim that the elimination of school prayer qualified as neutral with respect to religion. As with Justice Souter's concurrence, the *Schempp* Court's conclusions can qualify as neutral with respect to religion only on the basis of a form of consciousness that has itself been shaped by religion. There was no act of affirmative hostility to religion because God, if he exists, as to which the Court could be neutral, is a god of unqualified transcendence, as to which it could not, logically speaking, be neutral. For it is only because God does not avail students of a spatio-temporally embodied presence that he can be ignored without insult for the duration of the school day. Indeed, one perhaps venerates his unqualified transcendence most perfectly by so ignoring him, by rejecting the vain ostentation of daily school prayer in order to soberly devote oneself to one's academic callings. This is not anyone's official position, of course. But these understandings are all the same implicit on the level of social meaning. They are sedimented in the cosmological education promoted by a secular education. And this is why a secular education can "so structure" a child's life so as to place traditional religion at an artificial, state-created disadvantage.

Cosmological orientation permits us to conceptualize the problem of religion, and therefore of religious neutrality, not simply in terms of religious belief or doctrine, but in terms of the underlying forms of religiosity that may be replaced by secular analogues and therefore persist in existence even as the beliefs and doctrines through which they were formerly expressed are discarded, deemed irrelevant to public life, or declared the objects of state neutrality. As with Justice Souter's argument, the subtext of *Schempp* is that any felt religious burden created by the ruling arises out of, and can therefore be conceived as punishment for, a failure to achieve the buffered identity and with it the spiritual purity that would redeem one from this burden. The regimentation of the school day is not simply a potential obstacle to the prayer one would otherwise undertake, but the objective embodiment of social understandings that will eventually be refracted in the subjective self-understandings of individuals, and these social understandings all intimate the transcendence of pagan idolatry. This is why religious conservatives can detect an anti-religious significance in the fact that students are *not* praying.

Anxieties about a religion of secularism will seem extravagant to the precise degree to which the problem of religion has been framed in terms of beliefs rather than the cosmological orientation that expresses itself through religious beliefs, through opposition to religious beliefs, or, indeed, *through the ideal of religious neutrality itself*. For what was formerly a religious stance has simply mutated into the stance from out of which religious neutrality is to be gauged, with hostility toward idolatry having transmuted into hostility toward religion having transmuted into a conception of religious neutrality that expresses this hostility. Our disagreements about the meaning of religious neutrality are the

secularization of what first arose as religious oppositions, the sedimentation of the religious past in the jurisprudential present, the surreptitious replaying of a conflict between different kinds of believers as a conflict between different conceptions of what qualifies as neutrality between believers and non-believers.

5. Religious Neutrality as Ideology

Justice Brennan maintained that “historical acceptance of a particular practice alone is never sufficient to justify a challenged governmental action,” for “no one acquires a vested or protected right in violation of the Constitution by long use, even when that span of time covers our entire national existence and indeed predates it.”¹¹⁹ The point is intuitively compelling. It may be sociologically understandable that southern whites would have experienced desegregation as the imperious usurpation of their historically recognized rights. But none would argue that this subjective sense of grievance should bear on the meaning of the Equal Protection Clause, however human and predictable it may be. And in the same vein, the judiciary would seem duty-bound to distinguish between mere customary expectations and the logical entailments of state religious neutrality. Even if school prayer was once taken for granted, the Establishment Clause may all the same have been violated.

However, the issue before us is not *vested rights* but *established meanings*. History is relevant, not because of any blind presumption in favor of tradition as such, but by virtue of what Taylor calls “the sedimentation of the past in the present,” by virtue of the *presently existing* social meanings that have been built up out of tradition, meanings which impinge on the social and cosmological significance of what is transpiring *now*. This is what the mutation counter-narrative reveals and the subtraction account conceals. And as we will now see, this concealment generates intellectual contradictions that betray the hidden parochialism that conservatives detect in liberal neutrality.

The *Schempp* Court determined that a religion of secularism would have to involve an act of affirmative opposition or hostility toward religion. But we do not in ordinary social contexts subscribe to the behavioristic logic that the Court treats as a given. An individual who after being introduced to us then declines to extend his hand in order to greet us is, by the criterion implicit in the Court’s argument, also innocent of displaying affirmative opposition or hostility. And yet we will respond with offense. We do not in ordinary social contexts accept that others must have undertaken some physical motion before they can be said to have done something that “respects” us. Our introducee’s motionlessness

¹¹⁹ *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 718 (U.S. 1984) (quoting Walz, pg. 678).

notwithstanding, he *did* do something to us—namely, he insulted us—even if that insult cannot be operationalized as the passing of matter through specified spatio-temporal coordinates. We are not pre-social agents living in a Hobbesian state of nature, but denizens of a conventional world constructed out of common social understandings. It is on *their* basis, and not that of measurable physical activity, that we impute action or inaction to people.

This basic truth raises a question about why the *Schempp* Court framed the issue before it as it did. One can *choose* to describe “a refusal to permit religious exercises” behavioristically, as a mere non-occurrence. But one can also describe it as a positive action with a definite meaning, just like a refusal to shake someone’s hand. Correlatively, what Justice Stewart calls “permission of such exercises” could be seen as akin to a handshake, as a form of recognition—the “withholding of state hostility”—that falls well short of anything like “endorsement,” “approval,” or “support.” Which interpretation is the correct one? This is a question that cannot even be *raised* if behavioristic categories of description are presumed from the outset, which is precisely what the *Schempp* Court did in asserting that establishing a religion of secularism would have to involve “affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion.”

Liberals who would endorse this policy of “behavioristic preemption” in the Establishment Clause context will reject it in most others. For example, many liberals feel justified in describing America’s white majority and its government as racist, not for what they are presently doing or thinking, but precisely for what they are *not* doing and *not* thinking. They argue that in failing to satisfactorily redress the racial inequality bequeathed to contemporary America by slavery and Jim Crow, the government contributes to the perpetuation of structural racism, a fact that white America could recognize but chooses to ignore. In describing a certain kind of inattention to race as a form of affirmative hostility—in describing what might seem like a non-happening as a happening—proponents of the structural racism label are advancing a moral and political thesis. An uncompromising color-blindness that is heedless of history can qualify as a racism of sorts because the legacy of state-facilitated racial oppression “so structures”—to borrow from Justice Stewart—the lives of African-Americans that the mere failure to address race counts as the latest iteration of that very oppression. It is this historical legacy that transforms what would be mere inattention to race into an attitude *respecting* race. One can agree or disagree. But this is a question of political philosophy, and so a question that cannot be disposed of through the reductive equation of social hostility with specific misdeeds. Liberals do not accept this reductive equation in the race context. But they do accept it in the religion context, refusing to seriously contemplate the possibility that a public education “so structures” the lives of religious students so as to generate a form of anti-religious hostility that is irreducible to self-conscious, intentional animus.

The same intellectual contradiction crops up again when we turn to questions of economic equality. Unlike the radical libertarian, liberals do not automatically equate government impartiality with government inaction and government favoritism with government action. Unlike libertarians, they will not describe progressive taxation and the redistributive schemes it supports as a Robin Hood policy of robbing from some in order to lavish undeserved largesse upon others. The reason is that liberals do not draw the line between action and inaction along behavioristic lines, in reductive, physicalistic or quasi-physicalistic terms. For this is exactly what some libertarians do when they characterize income redistribution as a bureaucratically facilitated mugging: On pain of imprisonment, haves are compelled to surrender their belongings before a frenzied mob of envious have-nots. The meaning of progressive taxation having been represented in this way, it is distinguishable from street crime only by its means, not by its principle. But the liberal will respond that the libertarian has simply begged the question. Whether coercive usurpation is to be measured according to the baseline set by the “free market” or by some other measure is a question of political philosophy about which we can disagree. It is our answer to this question that determines whether a redistributive state is treating its citizens with equal respect or whether its high-minded language is a façade for legalized robbery. The radical libertarian is entitled to make his arguments from the state of nature, of course. He is not, however, entitled to preempt argument by disguising a philosophical position as a straightforward descriptive claim, as he is often wont to do.

But is this not the logic of *Schempp*, a logic that disguises a substantive normative judgment about the kind of respect owed religion in the claim that only an affirmative act could qualify as anti-religious hostility and that anything else is necessarily neutral? The Court represented itself as upholding the principle that the state should not meddle in religious affairs, which indeed sounds neutral. But the *Lochner* Court understood itself in a similar way, characterizing the regulatory state as a meddlesome busybody imperiously inserting itself into voluntary relations of industrious Americans. Allowing New York to regulate the working hours of bakers would mean that “[n]o trade, no occupation, no mode of living could escape this all-pervading power” of the legislature, as the state would “assume the position of a supervisor, or pater familias, over every act of the individual.”¹²⁰ Liberals invoke the very same slippery slope reasoning when they suggest that any government involvement in religion is the beginnings of a slide into theocracy. In both cases, the line between the authoritarian and the non-authoritarian is being defined behavioristically—that is, as a matter of physical action involving no reference to any social background and the moral, political, and philosophical questions that this background might raise.

¹²⁰ *Lochner v. New York*, 198 U.S. 45, 59-62 (U.S. 1905).

Indeed, Justice Brennan's concurring argument in *Schempp* mirrors the rhetoric of ideological libertarianism:

In my judgment the First Amendment forbids the State to inhibit that freedom of choice by diminishing the attractiveness of either alternative -- either by restricting the liberty of the private schools to inculcate whatever values they wish, or by jeopardizing the freedom of the public schools from private or sectarian pressures. The choice between these very different forms of education is one -- very much like the choice of whether or not to worship -- which our Constitution leaves to the individual parent. It is no proper function of the state or local government to influence or restrict that election. The lesson of history -- drawn more from the experiences of other countries than from our own -- is that a system of free public education forfeits its unique contribution to the growth of democratic citizenship when that choice ceases to be freely available to each parent.¹²¹

But of course, the choice of whether or not to enroll in a private religious school is "very much" like the choice of whether or not to worship only in that neither faces any formal legal obstacles. This aside, the big difference is that while the choice to worship is available to rich and poor alike, the choice to enroll in a private school usually is not, and this is very much a consequence of state action. As Justice Kennedy observed in *Alleghany*,

In this century, as the modern administrative state expands to touch the lives of its citizens in such diverse ways and redirects their financial choices through programs of its own, it is difficult to maintain the fiction that requiring government to avoid all assistance to religion can in fairness be viewed as serving the goal of neutrality.¹²²

With this economic backdrop appreciated, direct state subsidization of religious instruction could be seen, not as unconstitutional favoritism toward religion, but as the rectification of what would otherwise constitute state-sustained injustice. For this subsidization merely compensates for the tax burden which religious believers have incurred in support of secular public education. Indeed, we might go a step further and conclude that state subsidization of religion is not only constitutionally permissible but also constitutionally required if the state is "truly to be neutral in the matter of religion." Dissenting in *Barnette*, Justice Frankfurter warned that this would logically follow from the Court's broad proscription against the enshrining of a state orthodoxy: "What of the claim that if the right to send children to privately maintained schools is partly an exercise of religious conviction, to render effective this right it should be accompanied by equality of treatment by the state in supplying free textbooks, free lunch, and free transportation to children who go to private schools?"¹²³

¹²¹ *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 242 (U.S. 1963)

¹²² *County of Allegheny v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573, 657-658 (U.S. 1989)

¹²³ *W. Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 660 (U.S. 1943).

Elsewhere, liberals are more sensitive to the fact that formal freedom may be meaningless without the economic means to act on it, and believe that the government should take action to “render effective” rights that would otherwise remain purely formal and therefore empty. Why, then, will they not recognize the inadequacy of a purely formal freedom with respect to the religious upbringing of one’s children? Why, more generally, are liberals disposed toward thin descriptions in the Establishment Clause context but thick ones in that of race and class? Liberals can recognize the operation of an orthodoxy when government does nothing to rectify the power imbalance between labor and capital. And this is because they see the state as at the origin of the property rights that permit that imbalance. Why, then, do liberals not see an orthodoxy when the state channels the tax dollars of believers and non-believers alike toward the pedagogical preferences of the latter? Justice Brennan’s rhetoric simply *glides over* the obvious fact that parents who would send their children to private religious schools face a financial hurdle that is not suffered by those content with a secular public education—just as cavalierly as the *Lochner* Court glides over the power inequalities between bakers and the bakeries that employed them. In short, the liberal elites offer religious conservatives the same purely formal equality that they criticize as grossly inadequate in almost every other context.

The mutation counter-narrative reveals the hollowness of this equality in the context of religion. Liberals will emphasize that the Establishment Clause prohibits theists and atheists alike from using the schools to disseminate their tenets. But it is also the case, as Anatole France remarked, that the law “in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets or steal bread.”¹²⁴ And like the rich in relation to the right to sleep under bridges, the religion of secularism does *not need* to formally inculcate its tenets in order to advance its agenda, which is what Judge Hand and the *Smith* plaintiffs were ultimately claiming. And this is because that agenda is being advanced on the level of cosmological orientation, where the buffered identity has been so privileged as to be taken for granted and invisible. “Secular humanism” does not need to be promoted as a set of tenets because it is already being promoted through the immanent frame, the modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular, which alone affords more buffered liberals with a form of religio-heroic self-affirmation that is unavailable to more “pre-modern” conservatives.

Justice Brennan observes that the First Amendment has the “purpose of requiring on the part of all organs of government a strict neutrality toward theological questions.”¹²⁵ But it is only the modern free subject, the buffered self, who is at liberty to reduce religion to theology, to a particular sphere

¹²⁴

¹²⁵ *School. District. of Abington Township. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 243 (U.S. 1963)

toward which one or another “point of view” may be taken. And this is itself the product of certain religious developments. The very categories through which Souter frames his argument from investment—“affirming one’s beliefs” and “expressing one’s religious feelings”—represent, not unvarnished human nature, but the product of a transformation in Western societies’ understanding of God. The doctrinal emphasis on belief in the sense of self-consciously entertained propositions about the world is the outgrowth and secularization of what was originally a movement of religious reformation, with its stress on inner piety and hostility to charged objects and enchantment. Secularism is surreptitiously sectarian because the very *capacity* to conceptualize the problem of religious neutrality as secularists do has been facilitated by just these developments. If this goes unrecognized, this is because the subtraction account distortedly projects what is the outcome of a process of religious development—the buffered identity and its excarnated conception of religion devotion—into its inception, into the very essence of religion as such. This is the hidden ideology of liberal neutrality, the effect of which is to privilege one cosmological orientation over another.

Kathleen Sullivan writes that “[t]he right to free exercise of religion implies the right to free exercise of non-religion.”¹²⁶ But the question is precisely whether “non-religion” is indeed something to be *exercised* and not merely a *condition* to be in. On subtraction account, non-religion is just that, a condition ensuing from the overcoming of certain illusions or constraints. This being its status, religious believers can be asked to bear the costs of their own enterprise, as they would otherwise be demanding something—state support and validation—that non-believers neither request nor receive. But on the mutation counter-narrative, non-religion functions as a religious identity, because it is the secularization of the impulses of Religious Reform. As such, it is just like religion something that must be sustained in existence socially, and at the expense of competing religious impulses, which is what liberal neutrality facilitates.

The defendants in *Smith* argued that “any isolation or alienation that can be shown cannot be the result of the textbook passages questioned, but are almost inevitably the result of clashes between views of biblical literalists and our modern society,” for which reason “this is not a religious case, but is a case about clashes of cultures.”¹²⁷ But as Becker observes:

It is very important for students of man to be clear about this: culture itself is sacred, since *it* is the “religion” that assures in some way the perpetuation of its members. For a long time students of society liked to think in terms of “sacred” versus “profane” aspects of social life. But there has been continued dissatisfaction with this kind of simple dichotomy, and the reason is that there is really no basic distinction between sacred and profane in the symbolic affairs of men. As soon as

¹²⁶ Kathleen M. Sullivan, *Religion and Liberal Democracy*, 59 U. Chi. L. Rev. 195, 197 (1992).

¹²⁷ *Smith v. Board of School. Commissioners of Mobile County*, 655 F. Supp. 939, 948 (S.D. Ala. 1987)

you have symbols you have artificial self-transcendence via culture. Everything cultural is fabricated and given meaning by the mind, a meaning that was not given by physical nature. Culture is in this sense “supernatural,” and all systematizations of culture have in the end the same goal: to raise men above nature, to assure them that in some ways their lives count in the universe more than merely physical things count.¹²⁸

What liberals call non-religion, religious conservatives call secular humanism. But however it be labeled, it is a hero-system that is as such *symmetrical* with traditional religion. They are both competing systems of socially-sustained meaning-production supporting the “artificial self-transcendence” of their devotees. Secular liberals will reject the *Smith* plaintiffs’ contention that they and traditional theists have alike “immanentized the eschaton” because they reject the theological premises that seem built into this very choice of vocabulary. But as Becker shows, the very same conclusion—namely, that secular liberalism does not occupy any “neutral ground”—also follows from a purely secular, anthropological account of religion, culture, and their interrelationship. And what conservatives may present in religious terms can always be translated into this secular language, at which point we can ask whether they have truly enjoyed the protection of liberal principles, the question perennially raised by conservative claims of cultural oppression.

Offering a not uncommon account of religion’s psychological appeal and function, Marshall writes that

Religion protects the believer from the tremendum through doctrine and ritual. These devices work to create what James Breech has termed a “holding mode” of consciousness that functions by allowing the believer to anchor herself to what she sees as a stable and comprehensible God. By substituting doctrine and ritual for a naked encounter with the tremendum she is able to construct a sense of order and security that effectively hides the tremendum. The religious belief system, in essence, provides a psychological defense against overwhelming feelings of insignificance and chaos.¹²⁹

Even if Marshall’s very broad characterization of religion is correct, there remains a question about whether religion is unique in these regards. For I have been arguing that the buffered identity and its ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity offer a similar appeal. Like religion, this ethos is a hero-system, a culturally cultivated formula for standing above mere matter. In the case of religion, this is provided by faith in God. In the case of secular liberalism, it is provided by the aura of power, dignity, and invulnerability radiated by the buffered identity, which is also a “psychological defense against overwhelming feelings of insignificance and chaos.” Religious conservatives do not accept liberal

¹²⁸ Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pg. 4.

¹²⁹ William P. Marshall, *The Other Side of Religion*, 44 Hastings L.J. 843, 861 (1993). Marshall, *The Other Side of Religion*, at 856-57.

neutrality as genuine because they sense this aura, sense the identitarian undertones of liberals' commitment to secularism.

But seeing the world through "the eyes of Dewey," liberals are inured to these undertones as the invisible, taken-for-granted backdrop of things. Not recognizing the cultural contingency of their identity—the fact that it is "one historically constructed understanding of human agency among others"—they also cannot recognize the ways in which it is being promoted, or rather insinuated, in both institutional arrangements and judicial arguments. This is why Justice Souter could unselfconsciously represent a normative ideal, the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity, as an innocuous descriptive claim about what qualifies as a "realistic" burden, in this way concealing his argument's moralistic subtext that those who cannot accede to it suffer from a deficit of self-transparency from whose consequences no relief will be forthcoming. Just like whites so privileged as to not see race, secular liberals are in a position to see non-religion where others, religious conservatives, must see religion or anti-religion.

Secular liberals do not *feel* themselves to be hostile to religion. But feelings are not necessarily dispositive. For these feelings are, from the perspective of religious conservatives, akin to the feelings of the white supremacist who maintains that he is hostile, not toward blacks as such, but only toward those particular blacks who overstep their place rather than accepting the world as it is. And likewise, if secular liberals do not feel hostile toward religion, this is because the religion they have in mind is the kind that has adapted itself to secularism. It is only *on the basis of their hostility toward the pre-modern sensibility that secular liberals can aver that they are not hostile to religion*, for the only thing they are prepared to recognize as religion—as opposed to the imperiousness that overlays it—is that religion which has adapted itself to the secular, that is, to the immanent frame. What hostility they do experience, they attribute, not to religion itself, but to the imperiousness with which some religionists seek to publicly enshrine their orthodoxy. But as we have come to understand, this seemingly straightforward statement of position is highly problematic, because this very understanding of religion is religiously inspired.

Hero-systems might clash through the felling of sacred oak groves or the raising of Aztec temples. But they can also clash through the imposition of liberal neutrality. The liberal will say that only the former constitutes affirmative hostility or opposition to religion. But the relevance of this distinction depends on whether the underlying stakes are conceptualized behavioristically or at the level of the hero-system. St. Boniface's ultimate objective was not the physical destruction of trees but the symbolic destruction of the hero-system that they instantiated for the pagan Germans. The former was merely a means to achieving the latter, to the goal of undermining their psychological ability to persevere in their paganism and then

replacing the latter with another religion. It was an “assault on their faith,” as contemporary conservatives would put it. And I have been arguing that secular liberalism is engaged in an analogous project, because its understanding of religious neutrality institutes the immanent frame, which grew out and continues to “exude” a particular kind of spirituality. Whereas earlier agents of disenchantment had to fell forests in order to realize their ends, the “higher culture” of secular liberalism can dispense with such crudity and achieve the same through the disavowed layers of social meaning that conservatives can sense but are at pains to articulate—because it has “so structured” education in order to facilitate these meanings. Secular liberals will defend the separation of church and state as a preemptive measure against the kind of social havoc that their entanglement has historically wrought. But beyond this, strict separationism is part and parcel of a spiritual stance, a hero-system. The lawyers of the ACLU understand themselves as motivated by their political and constitutional ideals. But church/state separation, religious neutrality, and kindred concepts all describe the wellsprings of liberals’ motivations in “innocently thin terms,” concealing that what purport to be political principles are also forms of spiritual aspiration.

Failing to recognize this, liberals believe that they have submitted to a certain self-restraint that conservatives stubbornly refuse. Lilla writes:

Human beings everywhere think about the basic structure of reality and the right way to live, and many are lead from those questions to speculate about the divine or to believe in revelations. Psychologically speaking, it is a very short step from holding such beliefs to being convinced that they are legitimate sources of political authority. We know this from our history books and, in recent years, from world events. In the West people still think about God, man, and the world today—how could they not? But most seem to have trained themselves not to take that last step into politics. We are no longer in the habit of connecting our political discourse to theological or cosmological questions, and we no longer recognize revelation as politically authoritative. That we must rely on self-restraint should concern us.¹³⁰

But we do not rely only on self-restraint. Secularism is possible, not because individuals have restrained themselves from acting on the political implications of metaphysical beliefs, but because secularism functions as a hero-system and spiritual identity that transforms the very nature of belief and its relationship to the self as a whole. And this poses a challenge to liberals’ usual view of conservative claims of cultural oppression. On the subtraction account, religious conservatives are simply people who have not resigned themselves to the self-restraint on which all depend and which others have dutifully accepted. But this conclusion is undermined by the mutation counter-narrative. Understood in this framework, religious conservatives are not attempting to obtain something “extra,” something over-and-above what they will permit their fellow secular citizens, but merely attempting to persevere in their hero-

¹³⁰ Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, pg. 7

systems, as are secular liberals. The conflict is not between those who imperiously attempt to foist their personal theological predilections upon others and those so disciplined as to resist this urge, but between two competing systems of meaning-production, both of which are equally imperious on this level of analysis.

If this symmetry goes unrecognized, this is because *we have yet to fully secularize our understanding of secularity itself*, by taking secular naturalism to its logical conclusion and describing secularism, not as a set of lofty disembodied ideals like self-restraint, but as an evolved and embedded cultural phenomenon, as a particular configuration of consciousness and ethos. Thus approached, secularism is, following Kimball, as a “realm of habit, taste, and feeling,” a repository of what Nietzsche calls “old loves,” a symbolic action system that is always in potential collision with competing such systems. Here as elsewhere, liberalism cannot take its naturalism to its logical conclusion because that logical conclusion is precisely the point at which conservative claims of cultural oppression *begin to make sense*. Liberals cannot understand these claims because their identity requires them to deny the very existence of that to which they are *reactions*, the secular liberal hero-system and its imposition on unwilling others.

6. The Shadow of God

Being sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized, the hero-systems of the Left elude easy detection. For they have, as we observed, been “compressed” into naturalism, which provides them with plausible deniability. But as we also saw, this compression is occasionally betrayed by “wrinkles,” those exceptional instances on which the requirements of a hero-system enter into conflict with the requirements of naturalistic lucidity, revealing the ways in which the latter operates as a façade for the former. And as we shall now see, the problem of religious neutrality offers its own such wrinkles, which once again demonstrate liberalism’s inability to take its naturalism to its logical conclusion, where the asymmetries that liberals believe distinguish them from conservatives are dissolved.

Stephen Smith observes that the concept of the separation of church and state makes much less sense in a modern context than in the medieval culture where the idea that church and state are two separate and distinct spheres actually originated. In the pre-modern context, the church was understood to lie beyond the jurisdiction of the state because “it is the representative of a different realm of reality that transcends the secular and hence the state.” But this justification for separating church and state ceases to make sense within a modern understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular, in which “there *is* no realm of reality—no realm cognizable by the state, at least, that transcends

the secular.”¹³¹ Given that the religious no longer qualifies as a “special” realm in the eyes of the state, Smith believes that it would be more sensible to classify religious citizens and religious groups as simply “one class among many that the government would need to deal with.”¹³² A church should be treated no differently from the Rotary Club or the Red Cross, as a group which the state may regulate, subsidize, or collaborate with without any special constitutional hindrances.¹³³ Though churches are distinguished by religious convictions that are absent in these other organizations, Smith’s suggestion seems to be that those convictions should be cognized as purely secular phenomena, because the modern understanding of the secular does not provide us with a metaphysical basis for seeing them in any other way.

The contradiction is that while liberals accept, and indeed insist upon, the immanent frame, they refuse to conceptualize the meaning of religion itself within that frame, as a secular, natural phenomenon which, though perhaps amenable to some broader transcendent/supernatural contextualization, does not require one in order to be understood in the first instance. Whether a church does or does not occupy a metaphysical plane distinct from that of a rotary club should be of no concern to the state, something that the religiously neutral state can neither affirm nor deny. Why, then, do liberals insist on treating religious institutions as somehow “special,” the subject of special rules and special concerns?

This rather abstract question was concretized in *Kiryas Joel v. Grummet*, where the Supreme Court invalidated a New York statute carving out a school district specifically intended to accommodate the unusual educational needs of the Satmar Hasidim, a community of Yiddish-speaking ultra-Orthodox Jews, who did what they could to insulate themselves from the modern world.¹³⁴ While most Satmar children attended private religious schools, the disabled ones required special services that private schools could not provide. And so they were sent to attend public schools in the surrounding school district, where they could obtain the needed services. This proved disastrous, however, given what their parents described as “the panic, fear and trauma [that the children] suffered in leaving their own community and being with people whose ways were so different.”¹³⁵ The New York legislature responded by creating a new school district whose boundaries corresponded with those of the village that the Satmar had incorporated under a general law. This was, the Governor of New York explained, a “good faith effort to solve the unique

¹³¹ Stephen D. Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pg. 134.

¹³² *Ibid.*, pg. 133.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pg. 134.

¹³⁴ *Bd. of Educ. v. Grumet*, 512 U.S. 687, 691 (U.S. 1994) (“The residents of Kiryas Joel are vigorously religious people who make few concessions to the modern world and go to great lengths to avoid assimilation into it. They interpret the Torah strictly; segregate the sexes outside the home; speak Yiddish as their primary language; eschew television, radio, and English-language publications; and dress in distinctive ways that include headcoverings and special garments for boys and modest dresses for girls.”)

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 92.

problem” of “providing special education services to handicapped children in the village.” Being a creature of the state, the school district could not provide any religious instruction, of course. But it would at least allow the handicapped children to remain among their own kind.

Writing for the Court, Justice Souter concluded that the creation of this school district violated the Establishment Clause. For the state had delegated “its civil authority to a group chosen according to a religious criterion,” resulting in an impermissible “fusion of governmental and religious functions.”¹³⁶ The religious criterion was not expressly spelled out in the legislation, which delegated authority on the basis of geography rather than religion. But given the totality of the circumstances, it was plain that the law “effectively identifies these recipients of governmental authority by reference to doctrinal adherence.”¹³⁷ Dissenting, Justice Scalia argued that Souter’s conclusions were highly peculiar:

On what basis does JUSTICE SOUTER conclude that it is the theological distinctiveness rather than the cultural distinctiveness that was the basis for New York State’s decision? The normal assumption would be that it was the latter, since it was not theology but dress, language, and cultural alienation that posed the educational problem for the children. JUSTICE SOUTER not only does not adopt the logical assumption, he does not even give the New York Legislature the benefit of the doubt.¹³⁸

And so Justice Souter’s position boiled down “to the quite novel proposition that any group of citizens (say, the residents of Kiryas Joel) can be invested with political power, but not if they all belong to the same religion.”¹³⁹ He was effectively proclaiming that while the state may adopt special measures to accommodate the unique needs of cultural groups like “nonreligious commune dwellers, or American Indians, or gypsies,” it may not show “the same indulgence towards cultural characteristics that are accompanied by religious belief.” But this was to arbitrarily disfavor believers as against non-believers,¹⁴⁰ to subject religious practitioners “to a unique disability based solely on their status as religious practitioners.”¹⁴¹

Why, in other words, was the Court unprepared to look upon the Satmar in secular terms, as a merely cultural phenomenon? The Satmars themselves may not have distinguished between theology and culture as readily as Justice Scalia. Their cultural characteristics are not merely “accompanied” by religious beliefs but moreover permeated by them, because their religion is what explains why their

¹³⁶ Ibid., pg. 702 (quoting *Larkin v. Grendel’s Den*, 459 U.S. at 126 (internal quotation marks and citation omitted)).

¹³⁷ Ibid. pg. 699.

¹³⁸ Ibid., pg. 740-41.

¹³⁹ Ibid., pg. 737.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pg. 737.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. pg. 741 (quoting *McDaniel v. Paty*, 435 U.S. at 641 (Brennan, J., concurring in judgment)).

culture takes the shape it does. Nevertheless, the Court might have looked upon this interrelationship as just a *cultural* fact. Yes, the Satmars' pursuit of their own school district had something to do with what they understood to be God's commandments. But these commandments could be viewed as just part of an overall way of life, part of a *secular* phenomenon that as far as the state is concerned is commensurable with the ways of native Americans, gypsies, and non-religious commune dwellers. Satmar culture takes its shape from the Satmars' particular understanding of God. But the culture of nonreligious commune dwellers may take its shape from their disbelief in God. These origins, it seems, should be a matter of indifference to the religiously neutral state, which must see the world, including the Satmar, in non-religious terms.

David Sloane Wilson argues that the theory of evolution calls on us to conceive of religions as adaptive systems functioning to produce various forms of "secular utility" by coordinating individual behavior in socially desirable ways:

[P]eople who stand outside of religion often regard its seemingly irrational nature as more interesting and important to explain than its communal nature. Rational thought is treated as the gold standard against which religious belief is found so wanting that it becomes well-nigh inexplicable. Evolution causes us to think about the subject in a completely different way. Adaptation becomes the gold standard against which rational thought must be measured alongside other modes of thought. In a single stroke, rational thought becomes necessary but not sufficient to explain the length and breadth of human mentality, and the so-called irrational feature of religion can be studied respectfully as potential adaptations in their own right rather than as idiot relatives of rational thought.¹⁴²

Wilson believes that religious groups should be conceived of as organisms, as a "social physiology" through which gods, rituals, and sacrifices endow socially-minded behaviors with a meaning and motivation they might otherwise lack.¹⁴³ Calvinism for example, could have served as the basis of social organization in Calvin's Geneva because it "sanctifies the mundane occupations of life," allowing a baker or a farmer to "feel an element of holiness similar to that of a priest because all are ministers, performing organ-like functions to sustain the body of the church."¹⁴⁴ Calvinism and other religions draw on elements of human psychology that pre-exist religion—like repentance and forgiveness—in order to create new socially unifying systems that coordinate individual behaviors in socially beneficial ways.¹⁴⁵

This understanding of religion eliminates any basis for rigidly dichotomizing between religious unifying systems and other, secular such systems. Whether or not they involve a supernatural element,

¹⁴² David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), pg. 122.

¹⁴³

¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁵

all unifying systems will sometimes involve subordinating factual realism to practical realism and practical necessity.¹⁴⁶ What is unique is not religion but science, which is distinguished by a single-minded commitment to factual realism at all costs. But this commitment separates, not the secular from the religious, but science from every other form of human endeavor.¹⁴⁷ And so there is no reason to single out religion as uniquely irrational—or uniquely anything. Supernatural beliefs may not withstand scientific scrutiny. But the difference between supernatural beliefs and the reality-falsifying heuristics of secular unifying systems is really a matter of degree, and a difference that should be evaluated in the context of a religion's overall adaptive functions. As Becker says, culture is the religion, and this is because both perform similar biological services for human beings.

Why, then, are supposedly scientific-minded liberals so apprehensive that religion be singled out for special benefits? The state cannot avoid becoming involved in the promotion of evolutionarily developed adaptive systems, of which religion is only one variant. So why did Justice Souter see the New York law as a case of religious favoritism when he might have conceived of it in the terms suggested by Wilson, as an attempt to assist what is one “social physiology” among others—which is more or less what Justice Scalia was proposing? Someone who adopted the evolutionary perspective might see little to differentiate the Satmar from Justice Scalia's gypsies and non-religious commune dwellers. The former's theology would constitute just one adaptive mechanism among others, and this would be consistent with a fully secularized conception of the secular, which encompasses within itself the whole of empirical reality.

Not only did religious neutrality not *compel* Justice Souter's conceptualization, it arguably prohibited it. As an organ of the secular state, the Court should have felt obligated to conceptualize the Satmar's predicament in secular terms, as a problem of cultural alienation that may or may not also have a religious significance. To uphold the constitutionality of the Satmars' school district could then have been viewed, not as a case of religious favoritism, but, on the contrary, as a secular-minded and scientifically-motivated *indifference* to what religious believers see as distinctive about their religion. For that religion will have been approached naturalistically, in wholly secular terms, as an evolutionarily adaptive system of meaning-production and behavior-coordination toward whose ultimate metaphysical status the state must remain agnostic and indifferent. Justice Souter seems to be on the side of secularism. But his position is in fact inconsistent with the modern understanding of the secular, which should have precluded him from seeing religion as a special sphere to which different rules apply. His

¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁷

argument concedes nothing to religion politically or financially, but it concedes a great deal to it *conceptually*, because it concedes the existence of a religious *reality* that cannot be cognized in secular terms.

* * *

What can explain this? A clue is provided by Justice Stevens's concurring opinion. Rather than addressing the Satmar children's social difficulties by more aggressively cultivating respect for diversity, the state had

...responded with a solution that affirmatively supports a religious sect's interest in segregating itself and preventing its children from associating with their neighbors. The isolation of these children, while it may protect them from "panic, fear and trauma," also unquestionably increased the likelihood that they would remain within the fold, faithful adherents of their parents' religious faith. By creating a school district that is specifically intended to shield children from contact with others who have "different ways," the State provided official support to cement the attachment of young adherents to a particular faith.¹⁴⁸

Justice Scalia dismissed this concern as "less a legal analysis than a manifesto of secularism." For Justice Stevens was announcing "a positive hostility to religion -- which, unlike all other noncriminal values, the State must not assist parents in transmitting to their offspring."¹⁴⁹ And the anti-religious hostility consists in what seems to be Justice Stevens's assumption that religious values pose a special hindrance to the mental freedom of their adherents in a way that other cultural values do not. And this is also the liberal assumption. While liberals do not deny that we are all significantly shaped by our social environments, they generally suspect that religious environments are uniquely constraining, posing a special hindrance to the development of the liberal virtues. All social environments influence, but it is only religious environments that risk "cementing" us to our worldviews, as concerned Justice Stevens. *This* is why liberals will not treat the Satmar as a secular phenomenon, because they do not appear to embrace the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity in terms of which the secular has been defined.

This ethos is why Steven Gey defends French laws restricting religious clothing in public schools as providing a "buffer zone between an individual student and the social matrix in which the student's family and religious community apply intense pressure to conform to a specific religious regimen."¹⁵⁰ And the same principle, Gey thinks, may also justify placing restrictions on religious clubs in American public schools. Though these clubs operate after school hours and under private sponsorship, their goal is "to

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., pg.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pg. 749 (Scalia, J., dissenting).

¹⁵⁰ Steven G. Gey, *Free Will, Religious Liberty, and a Partial Defense of the French Approach to Religious Expression in Public Schools*, 42 Hous. L. Rev. 1, 26 (2005)

present young children with an all-encompassing and exclusive perspective on the world.”¹⁵¹ And this is incompatible with liberals’ commitment to critical thinking. While restricting such groups will be denounced as an infringement on religious freedom, Gey believes that such a policy targets, not religious liberty, but “coercive religious inertia,” a “subtle pressure directing religious students not to deviate from a religious path already chosen.”¹⁵² Far from burdening religious liberty, eliminating these organizations would merely expand “the horizons of children who would otherwise be cloistered in a monotone world of predefined absolutes,”¹⁵³ would merely free children “from their most immediate influences” in order to develop “intellectual muscles” and a “spirit of independence.”¹⁵⁴ Just like Justice Stevens, Gey understands himself as concerned, not with the substantive content of religious values—as to which the state must presumably remain neutral—but with the constraints that religious subcultures threaten to impose on children’s ability to freely choose those values.

But these apprehensions are simply incompatible with a genuinely naturalistic understanding of the secular, as one “social physiology” among others. Students with strong religious upbringings may appear “cloistered,” as Gey says. But a fully naturalistic understanding of human agency reveals that we are all cloistered by synaptically encrypted identities and the social physiologies from which they are derived. Gey speaks of the “intellectual muscles” instilled by a secular education and stunted by a religious one, but a fully neurologized political science reveals that the intellectual muscles of believers and non-believers alike operate according to a logic that is less flexible and open-ended than is suggested by grand talk of a “spirit of independence”—which bespeaks an outdated “Old Enlightenment” view of human nature. Whether religious or secular, we are all “neurally bound” to our worldviews, as Lakoff says—or all “cemented” as Justice Stevens says. Once again, liberalism refuses to take its naturalism to its logical conclusion, to where it might reveal the symmetries that conservatives sense intuitively.

Observing that the religion clauses presuppose some distinction between genuinely religious beliefs and practices and those resting on political or philosophical foundations—that is, “ideologies”—Stanley Ingber writes that religion “provides a cosmology or explanation of the meaning of life and the ordering of the universe by answering questions many feel are beyond the capacities of reason and logic.”¹⁵⁵ Whereas ideology is based on “reason, rationality, and sensory experience,”¹⁵⁶ religion is based

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pg. 26.

¹⁵² Ibid., pg. 25.

¹⁵³ Ibid., pg. 50-51.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 68-69.

¹⁵⁵ Stanley Ingber, *Religion or Ideology: A Need Clarification of the Religion Clauses*, 41 Stan. L. Rev. 233, 278 (1989)

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 279.

on a transcendent reality, the “peculiar otherness – the extraordinary, momentous, set-apart quality of sacred (or taboo) acts and objects.”¹⁵⁷ But these distinctions are incongruous with what Becker describes as the anthropological consensus and what Wilson defends as the evolutionary perspective. For every social physiology, whether secular or religious, will involve a transcendent element that resists the scrutiny of individual reason. For this reason is in every case guided by vast and unconscious neural networks that have been ordered by a complicated array of cultural forces whose workings may be extremely difficult to understand. The sense that the mental freedom of religious believers is uniquely constrained, that there exists some rigid dichotomy between the autonomous self-directedness of the secular-minded and the heteronomous blindness of religionists, is simply incompatible with a fully naturalistic, New Enlightenment understanding of human beings, as organisms whose inner workings have been profoundly structured by their social and cultural environments.

If liberals nevertheless insist that the mental freedom of religious traditionalists is uniquely constrained, this is because they have defined mental freedom in accordance with the dominant dispensation. The cultural transmission of religious values could strike Justice Stevens as uniquely coercive because the Satmar have been implicitly defined by the buffered distance, as the less fortunate peoples of a barbarian past. If they are easily “cemented” to their worldviews, this is because they are porous selves who have failed to internalize the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity and so have surrendered to the “promptings of the senses” and the “consolations of the enchanted world.” What Stevens represents as a concern about the degree of freedom that Satmar culture allows its children was in fact a rhetorically palatable way of objecting to this culture itself in the name of the buffered distance—which liberals believe provides them with a superior, more self-transparent and self-regulating form of human agency.

But this is liberal ideology. Secular liberals claim to promote “freedom.” But this freedom in fact refers to a specific ethos, a particular way of being that is as “fixed” as are Satmar sensibilities. “Freedom” is always the freedom to operate within a hero-system. While liberalism mistakes itself as the transcendence of all hero-systems, the truth is that neither secular nor religious unifying systems can deliver absolute self-possession promised by the buffered identity, which is fundamentally incongruous with these systems’ embedded socio-biological nature. But the nature of that identity nevertheless requires its bearers to posit an unrealistically stark dichotomy between the self-awareness of the properly civilized and the self-oblivion of those who refuse the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pg. 285-86.

and instead cling to the teleological illusions of a religious past. If secularists think inconsistently with their own understanding of the secular in refusing to look upon religion as a secular phenomenon, this is because that understanding is not, in fact, fully secularized. For it is inflected by a religiously-inspired hostility to the enfleshed pre-modern religiosity for which the Satmars stand as symbols. As I have been arguing, our contemporary understanding of the secular grew out of the movement of Religious Reform. And this legacy's ongoing influence is betrayed in liberal attitudes toward religious conservatives, who are understood to embody all the vices that Religious Reform once associated with paganism. This is why liberals can feel comfortable projecting what is a human constant—being “cemented”—onto religious conservatives alone, because this cementing is but a secularized translation of what was once condemned as fallenness into idolatry.

* * *

This same less than fully secularized understanding of the secular was at work in Justice Brennan's concern that a nativity scene constituted a “mystical recreation” of the birth of Jesus that might “prompt” in the casual passerby a sense of “simple awe and wonder appropriate to the contemplation of one of the central elements of Christian dogma -- that God sent His Son into the world to be a Messiah.” But it is not obvious why any such prompt should vitiate the religious neutrality of the state action. For one would think that whether or not a nativity scene exercises this power to stimulate feelings of “simple awe and wonder” will have something to do with the identity of the casual passerby in question. To the extent a sense of mystical awe is in fact prompted, this would presumably be because the passerby is already religious. For this is what endows a nativity scene with a properly religious meaning. By contrast, an atheist could be expected to view the nativity scene as a purely secular phenomenon, as a collection of plastic figurines rather than a mystical recreation that elicits simple awe and wonder. In either case, the religiosity of the display is a function of the identity of the passerby, and not an inherent quality of the state action, which thus understood seems neutral.

Why, then, does Justice Brennan just like Justice Souter insist on assigning a religious significance to something that can be understood in purely secular terms? We could, as Smith observes is required by the modern understanding of the secular, look upon state sponsorship of a nativity scene as akin to state sponsorship of St. Patrick's Day festivities. In the one case as in the other, the state is sponsoring an activity that may not be equally meaningfully to all taxpayers. But this unfairness can be understood in purely secular terms, as a matter of cultural preference. Why should non-believers feel put upon when they can, following Dennett, conceive of whatever mystical awe was being “prompted” in some of their

fellow citizens as a function, not of divine revelation, but of the exuberance of their hyper-active agency detection devices—a secular phenomenon. To be constitutional, a state action must have a “secular purpose.” But this secular purpose would simply be the stimulation of an evolutionarily ingrained disposition in those seeking that stimulation, just as the secular purpose of St. Patrick Day’s festivities is to satisfy an affinity for things Irish. Whether the state action was religious or secular would be in the eye of the beholder. Why not define *this* as true pluralism and neutrality?

We have already come upon the explanation. If secularists are unwilling to conceptualize the infusion of mystical awe detected by Justice Brennan in secular terms—as something akin to the enthusiasm prompted by a St. Patrick’s Day celebration—this is because secular wariness about religion recapitulates excarnated religion’s hostility to the pagan idolatry of earlier, more enfleshed forms of religiosity. What is objectionable to Justice Brennan is not the prospect that anyone should be coerced by the state into feelings of mystical awe, but the mystical awe itself. And this is because his secularism is inflected by religiously-inspired hostility to enchantment and the porousness that permits it.

This kind of hostility was discerned by Justice Scalia when he objected to the *McCreary* Court’s conclusion that including the Ten Commandments in a display about the foundations of American law reflected “a purpose to [call on] citizens to act in prescribed ways as a personal response to divine authority.” But Justice Scalia believed that the average, reasonable observer “would no more think himself ‘called upon to act’ in conformance with the Commandments than he would think himself called upon to think and act like William Bradford because of the courthouse posting of the Mayflower Compact—especially when he is told that the exhibit consists of documents that contributed to American law and government.”¹⁵⁸ The sense that passersby might feel “called upon” to experience religious sentiments, whether through nativity scenes or Ten Commandments postings, is the buffered self’s anxiety before the porousness of the porous one, before the threat which religion poses to the ethos of disengaged self-control and self-reflexivity. For this is here as elsewhere what the liberal elites are actually upholding in their calls for religious neutrality, which therefore has a *policing* function.

If these elites distrust the decision-making capacities of the “ordinary American,” this is because the latter lacks the disengagement and self-possession that would enable him to look upon the Ten Commandments or a nativity scene as secular phenomenon. The Ten Commandments and nativity scene are alike potential “charged objects.” And secular liberals are foremost driven by the apprehension that they might provide religious conservatives with an infusion of religious meaning that will legitimate them

¹⁵⁸ *McCreary County v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 905 (U.S. 2005).

in their pre-modern sensibility, in their continued resistance to the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity. There would be no endorsement to the extent a state action is merely acknowledging religion's historical relevance. But this presupposes that one first conceives of religion in secular terms, as something fully cognizable within the immanent frame. And this is precisely what religious conservatives cannot, given their pre-modern sensibility, be entrusted to do. This distrust has a religious subtext, the legacy of its religious origins, as the secular analogue of traditional religious fears about a fall into paganism and idolatry, the will's surrender to sin and temptation, which have now been identified with religion itself. Hence John Gray's observation that "[u]nbelief is a move in a game whose rules are set by believers."¹⁵⁹ Religion has not been subtracted, for it provides the basic lens through which religious neutrality is now conceptualized. As we observed with Gillespie in Chapter 5, "[w]hat actually occurs in the course of modernity is thus not simply the erasure or disappearance of God but the transference of his attributes, essential powers, and capacities to other entities or realms of being," and the concept of religious neutrality is one of these other realms of being.

Nietzsche writes that we do not as yet understand the full magnitude of the Death of God, because we do not as yet grasp "how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it."¹⁶⁰ He explains,

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the ways of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. —And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow too.¹⁶¹

There can be a "shadow of God" because contemporary secularism is not a primordial phenomenon—what naturally ensues upon some religiously neutral liberation of one's faculties—but rather the immanetization and internalization of a particular kind of monotheistic religiosity. Though contemporary secularism may repudiate monotheism *qua* religious belief, it incorporates it *qua* cosmological orientation, which is what casts the shadow of God on liberal neutrality. And this shadow is why liberals cannot look upon religion as a secular phenomenon. For the secular is defined, not by any culturally neutral naturalism or pluralism, but by *resistance* to the pre-modern sensibility, resistance to "embodied feelings of the higher" by which religious conservatives risk being overtaken. The ordinarily unarticulated social meaning of religious neutrality is to delegitimize these, which is why conservatives are perfectly correct to detect anti-religious hostility where they do.

¹⁵⁹ John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007), pg. 126.

¹⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 279 (Sec. 343).

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 167 (Sec. 108).

They were reacting to this hostility in December 2008, when Fox News's Bill O'Reilly spearheaded a campaign against an atheist placard that had been placed adjacent to a privately-sponsored nativity scene on the grounds of the Washington State capitol. The placard, which exalted reason to the disparagement of religion, had been sponsored by the Freedom from Religion Foundation, an advocacy group for atheists, agnostics and other freethinkers. And O'Reilly objected that the Governor should have allowed the sign to be placed right by the nativity scene rather than elsewhere on the capitol grounds, where it would not function as a standing rebuke to the nativity scene. Atheists and liberals responded that this objection simply betrayed the dogmatism of those who do not cherish a free market of ideas: "If the state is going to permit religious believers to erect a nativity scene on public grounds, then it cannot stand in the way of those who would challenge the viewpoint it represents." But the mutation counter-narrative reveals this argument as disingenuous. The purpose of the atheist sign was not to challenge an opposing viewpoint but to create a semantic context that would *reduce* the meaning of the nativity scene to a viewpoint—that would impose the immanent frame. And this was in order to suppress the nativity scene's power to operate as a charged object, to eliminate the risk that porous selves might draw spiritual sustenance from it. The purpose of the atheist placard was not to facilitate a free exchange of ideas, but to facilitate one cosmological orientation's transgression against another. What secularists framed as a struggle between dogmatism and free thought, religious conservatives experienced as the buffered identity's aggression against the porous one, and this was why they claimed cultural oppression.

The kind of aggression is naturally concealed by the epistemological framework, which here as elsewhere deploys the lingo of beliefs in order to obscure the problem of cosmological orientation and, with it, the subtle impositions of social meaning that the liberal dispensation perpetrates against conservatives. This rhetorical advantage is illustrated when Macedo takes issue with Stephen Carter's argument that mere tolerance for religious believers is inadequate because:

Tolerance without respect means little; if I tolerate you but do not respect you, the message of my tolerance, day after day, is that it is *my* forbearance, not *your* right, and certainly not the nation's commitment to equality, that frees you to practice your religion. You do sit by my sufferance, but not with my approval.¹⁶²

But Carter's argument, retorts Macedo, is "strangely confused," because it illegitimately conflates citizens' obligation to respect each other's *rights* with an obligation to approve of the *choices* made within the limits of those rights, an obligation with no place in a pluralistic society.¹⁶³ Conflating "intellectual disagreement with physical vulnerability," Carter is seeking to protect, "not the freedom to disagree

¹⁶² Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, pg. 222.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pg. 223.

vigorously, but the psychological fragility and sensitivity of religious believers, a sensitivity that is inconsistent with vigorous disagreement.”¹⁶⁴ However, the disrespect sensed by religious believers at the hands of secularists cannot be reduced to the travails of vigorous disagreement, because this disrespect reflects how the buffered identity, as a value-charged understanding of human agency, must look upon the porous one—not merely as mistaken or lacking in intellectual rigor, but as fundamentally deficient in the agency powers that define fully realized human nature. Having been judged lacking in the self-control and self-reflexivity that distinguishes the truly human, religious conservatives cannot but exude an “animal-pole negative magnetism” to liberals. In demanding equal respect from liberals, they are reacting to precisely this. If religious conservatives feel that they sit by the “sufferance” of liberals, this is because they correctly sense that their pre-modern sensibility is a continuous source of visceral offense to them.

Here as elsewhere, liberals’ conservaphobia originates in the challenge that conservatives pose to the distortive naturalization of the buffered identity. Michael Novak writes:

Many Americans may have a bad conscience about their rejection of the traditional views of Judaism and Christianity. They know deep down that something vital and true springs from those roots, and still moves them. On the other hand, they have ‘modernized’ in certain parts of their mind, and they do not know how to put this modernization together with their traditional longings. They hate those who exacerbate this tension in their own souls.

You will note, for instance, the difference between American and European atheists. The Americans who reject religion do so with a kind of emotional violence, and the same time are quick to boast about their own moral superiority...By contrast, the European atheist is much more self-assured, and often manifests the sly smile of the complete cynic and nihilist, who happily believes in nothing at all.¹⁶⁵

This tension within the souls of American secularists is here articulated in epistemological terms, as a conflict between their rejection of traditional religious values and a suppressed faith in them. But in the context of the mutation counter-narrative, the dissonance originates in human nature’s default porousness, of which religious conservatives are unwelcome reminders. This being our default state, that which the buffered identity is called upon to resist—the porous submersion of subjectivity in nature—arises out of *its own nature*—whether through our HADDs or some other mechanism. As we saw already in Chapter 4, the modern, buffered identity is a cultural superimposition on a layer of human experience that resists its conventions. And this renders the buffered identity as rather precarious thing. “Anti-religious hostility” is a response to this problem, an attempt to suppress liberals’ own default porousness and so preempt any potential regression toward it—a danger that can never be completely eliminated.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., pg. 223.

¹⁶⁵ Qt. in Limbaugh, *Persecution*, pg. 331.

This hostility is, in a sense, like the ropes that bounded Odysseus to the ship's mast amidst the songs of sirens. For it is the glue that binds liberals to the buffered identity, which cannot be maintained through "enlightenment" alone. Just as homophobia may be driven by an inner conflict with one's own homosexual inclinations, which are disingenuously externalized and then opposed as an alien force, so the anti-religious hostility of liberals arises out of the buffered self's need to deny its own underlying porousness—which anti-religious hostility allows it to project onto conservatives.

This is why religious believers can see themselves as victims of bigotry and adopt the posture of the beleaguered underdog. Vigorous disagreement should not be conflated with physical vulnerability, of course. But any allusions to physical vulnerability symbolically betoken the fact that religious disagreement is never a purely theoretical matter. For the "disagreement" of liberals is directed, not only at arguments, but also at identities. Physical violence may not be on the horizon, but secularist attitudes nevertheless embody another kind of violence of which religious conservatives are all too well aware—the sublimated, intellectualized, and etherealized violence of which liberalism is uniquely capable. Though operating under the veneer of detached ratiocination, it is but the deceptive and self-deceptive mimicry of that detachment, whose social meaning is in fact highly aggressive. If Carter's argument is "strangely confused," the strangeness and confusion is, here as elsewhere, attributable to the rhetorical supremacy of the buffered identity, which forces conservatives to articulate cosmological grievances in epistemological terms, at which point they are easily discredited as outlandish, conspiratorial, or authoritarian.

7. Concluding Reflections

Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore argue that while "America's original founding as a Christian state is central to the Christian Right's conspiratorial view of history," this view of history in fact stands the truth on its head.¹⁶⁶ For the Christian Right's assertion that the Constitution was originally envisioned as a Christian document is belied by what was a "concerted campaign to discredit the Constitution as irreligious, which for many of its opponents was its principle flaw."¹⁶⁷ This concern was expressed again and again both at the founding and later. The "no religious tests" clause produced a firestorm of controversy during the state ratification conventions.¹⁶⁸ Running for president, Thomas Jefferson was

¹⁶⁶ Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution: A Moral Defense of the Secular State* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), pg. 22.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 28.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 32.

vilified as anti-Christian in a fashion reminiscent of today's politics.¹⁶⁹ The War of 1812 was cited by some as divine retribution for the country's failure to acknowledge God in the Constitution.¹⁷⁰ There was also a campaign during the Civil War to directly insert God and Christ into the Constitution through a Christian amendment.¹⁷¹ And it took nearly a century for opponents of Sunday mail to achieve their goal and finally persuade Congress to close all post offices on Sunday for good in 1912.¹⁷²

Taken together, these facts give the lie to the Christian Right narrative. While the Christian Right insists that the country was erected on Christian foundations that were later betrayed by the depredations of conniving secular humanists, this rhetorical strategy originates in fundamentalists' repeated failure to reverse what they once conceded to be the Constitution's secular foundations. Still retaining the hope that the Constitution might actually be amended, earlier iterations of the Christian Right could acknowledge the historical truth of a godless Constitution. But their contemporary heirs have lost this hope and so must engage in revisionist history, in order to conceal that it is religious conservatives, not secularists, who have pitted themselves against America's original foundations.

Kramnick and Moore's argument is entirely cogent. But as we have seen, conservative claims of cultural oppression are distorted articulations of conservatives' under-theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative. While religious conservatives may give short shrift to the secularism of America's founding generation, this distortion is a distorted expression of their primordial intuition that human agency is porous by default and that what now pretends to be human nature in its pristine essence—the buffered identity—is a cultural superimposition upon that default condition. This is why they believe they represent the common sense of humanity—the “center” rather than the “fringe” as the Websters put it—and that “religious neutrality” unjustly compels them to undergo forms of cognitive dissonance with which the liberals who reject that common sense are not burdened. What religious conservatives hold out as America's Christian founding is a symbolic representation for their sense of a time of lost origins, their visceral sense that liberalism inauthentically betrays something that continues to inhere in us all. And the deep truth of this secret suspicion is to be found in the mutation counter-narrative, which explains the sense in which liberalism is indeed “artificial.” Interpreted literally, the Christian Right narrative may be mostly false. But interpreted allegorically, it is a distorted articulation of this “higher truth,” which is that liberals are on some level in revolt against human nature itself.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., pg. 88.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., pg. 105.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pg. 144.

¹⁷² Ibid., pg. 142.

Liberals have proven unable to recognize this, however. Lilla writes that while the Anglo-American liberal tradition of religious tolerance has been successful on its own terms, it lacks the resources to grasp the full psychological complexity of religious commitment:

Success has bred complacency. The success is real: contemporary liberal democracies have managed to accommodate religion without setting off sectarian violence or encouraging theocracy, which is a historic achievement. But accommodation is not understanding. Though Britain and the United States can pride themselves on having cultivated the ideas of toleration, freedom of conscience, and a formal separation of church and state, their success has depended on a wholly unique experience with Protestant sectarianism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Anglo-American liberal tradition lacks a vocabulary for describing the full psychological complexity of its own religious life, let alone for understanding the relation between faith and politics in other parts of the world.¹⁷³

If the Anglo-American liberal tradition lacks a vocabulary for describing the full psychological complexity of America's religious life, this is because it lacks a vocabulary for describing the pre-modern sensibility and the cultural transformations through which the modern emerged from out of it. The liberal tradition may have brought the old conflicts between Protestants, and then between Protestants and Catholics, to a successful resolution. But there is, I have been arguing, an equally venerable struggle between moderns and pre-moderns, which can in turn be understood as one iteration of an as yet more venerable struggle between monotheists and pagans. This conflict is not officially announced. But it is transpiring through the imposition of the immanent frame and conservatives' resistance to that imposition, which is in turn disguised in what purports to be a conflict between the secular and the religious. This is the origin of the psychological complexity that liberalism fails to grasp.

Dissenting in *McCreary County v. ACLU*, Justice Scalia objected that the outcome was untrue to the original understanding of the Constitution, which the Court was disrespecting. The Court's assertion that the Establishment Clause "lacks the comfort of categorical absolutes" was merely a "lovely euphemism" for the fact that "sometimes the Court chooses to decide cases on the principle that government cannot favor religion, and sometimes it does not."¹⁷⁴ Nothing, according to Justice Scalia "stands behind the Court's assertion that governmental affirmation of the society's belief in God is unconstitutional except the Court's own say-so, citing as support only the unsubstantiated say-so of earlier Courts going back no further than the mid-20th century."¹⁷⁵ Against this accusation of fecklessness, Justice Souter retorted:

The fair inference is that there was no common understanding about the limits of the establishment prohibition, and the dissent's conclusion that its narrower view was the original

¹⁷³ Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, pg. 304.

¹⁷⁴ *McCreary County v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 891 (U.S. 2005) (Scalia, J., dissenting).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 890 (J. Scalia, dissenting).

understanding....stretches the evidence beyond tensile capacity. What the evidence does show is a group of statesmen, like others before and after them, who proposed a guarantee with contours not wholly worked out, leaving the Establishment Clause with edges still to be determined. And none the worse for that. Indeterminate edges are the kind to have in a constitution meant to endure, and to meet "exigencies which, if foreseen at all, must have been seen dimly, and which can be best provided for as they occur."¹⁷⁶

Justice Souter's argument is essentially that the Establishment Clause has proven recalcitrant to consensus because opinion was divided at the founding, because subsequent opinion has been divided with respect to the constitutional significance of these original divisions, and because unprecedented fact situations have further ambiguated the ambiguity that was always there from the outset. What Justice Scalia unfairly dismisses as judicial caprice is, then, nothing more than the honest recognition of this ambiguity, which the quest for original understanding disingenuously denies. But there is a third way of accounting for these indeterminate edges. While Justice Souter's observations seem eminently plausible, they also obscure something essential. For the indeterminacy he posits arises, not only out of a constitutional convention and the political traditions that informed it, but also out of tensions that are inherent to the *development of monotheism itself*, tensions concerning the relative immanence or transcendence of God. These tensions now structure the very categories through which the problem of religious neutrality is framed, determining the kind of god with respect to which the state is being neutral. It is these *theological* tensions which undergird the indeterminate edges cited by Justice Souter.

Concurring in *Schempp*, Justice Brennan wrote that the "difficulty of delineating hostility from neutrality in the closest cases" cannot justify making exceptions to the principle of strict neutrality.¹⁷⁷ But the problem presented by the Establishment Clause is not a proliferation of "close cases" in which a generally unproblematic concept becomes difficult to apply but, more profoundly, the fact that our conceptions of neutrality can find no justification outside themselves. Being the direct expressions of our cosmological orientations, our understandings of the relationship between the religious and the secular, these conceptions are always ideological superstructures for something more primordial. Neutrality with respect to religion has proven to be an intractable problem because any conception of neutrality must lend surreptitious expression to the very things with respect to which judicial impartiality is ultimately being expected. These are not our religious or non-religious beliefs but our religious or "non-religious" identities, the cosmological orientations according to which God is pre-reflectively sensed as more immanent or more transcendent. The meaning of the secular being a creation of religion, ostensibly secular reasoning can never altogether escape its origins. If secularization is, as per the mutation counter-

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pg. 879 (citing *McCulloch v. Maryland*, 17 U.S. 316 (1819)).

¹⁷⁷ [Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 245-246 \(U.S. 1963\)](#)

narrative, necessarily the secularization of something that is not itself secular, then we can expect that *arguments about the meaning of religious neutrality can always be reconstructed as theological claims* about the relative immanence or transcendence of God. This is what I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter. And the upshot of this argument is that interpreting the Establishment Clause is in itself a religious activity—a supreme irony if ever there was one.

Secular liberals and religious conservatives keep talking past one another, not because one party obstinately refuses to see what lies there waiting to be seen, but because they are fundamentally *different kinds of people* who process the world, and therefore the meaning of religious neutrality, in fundamentally different ways. What each side represents as its attempt at logical persuasion is, on a deeper level and more thickly-described, a demand for *conversion*, not to any particular theological tenet or its denial, but to a way of being that implicates us in a pre-conceptual understanding of the relation between self and world and, through this, of the relation between the religious, the non-religious, and the anti-religious. This is why the Establishment Clause has engendered an interminable dance of claims and counterclaims about who is the oppressed and who is the oppressor, about who is the freethinker and who is the apparatchik. It is the reason why secular liberals and religious conservatives seem to differ, not only in their narrowly prescriptive claims but, as significantly, in their basic characterizations of the status quo, in their understandings of their own and one another's motivations, and in their assessments of the present distribution of suffering as between believers and non-believers. Is it non-believers who are at every turn at risk of discrimination at the hands of would-be theocrats? Or is it secular humanists who have successfully instituted a widespread program of rigorous ideological indoctrination? The intractability of these disagreements is no accident, but rather a logical reflection of the fact that there is no religiously neutral vantage point on religious neutrality. Whether the cessation of organized school prayer effectuates that neutrality or establishes a religion of secularism is a function of God's relative transcendence or immanence, a question the answer to which has been built into our very sense of agency, into an inarticulate sense of the human-divine nexus that is always implicit in human consciousness.

Stolzenberg notes the paradox that while some criticize the ideals of liberalism as overly "thin" for resting on moral abstractions like tolerance, reason, and choice, others see liberalism in an opposite fashion, as "the socially produced, enforced, and reproduced artifacts of a liberal culture"—as "thick" values imperiously foisted upon people with a different conception of the good. The puzzle, then, is how liberal institutions can be simultaneously "both thick and thin," how what seem like deracinated

abstractions could function as substantive cultural impositions.¹⁷⁸ The solution to that puzzle is provided by the mutation counter-narrative, which explains how liberalism can be thin on the level of belief and yet thick on the level of cosmological orientation, which is where the substantive cultural imposition is transpiring.

This is what drove the Websters' complaint that the contested textbooks had characterized the values they were encouraging in their children as "our values" when those values had in fact emanated from Jesus Christ. The textbook's characterization of the Webster's values as their own can strike liberals as religiously neutral because it takes no position on whether these values are *also* God's values—no position on the relative merits of the closed and open interpretations of the immanent frame. But this kind of neutrality *comes too late* for the Websters, who were oppressed by this very conceptualization of the problem. In rejecting the home economics textbook's remarks about "our" values, the Websters were objecting to the presumption that what they understood as their participation in a transcendent dispensation can be described naturalistically, as the reproduction of settled values and attitudes via the socialization of malleable children. They objected to talk of "our" values, not because they were imperiously demanding that the state attribute their ultimate authorship to Christ, but because this characterization was incongruous with their basic experience of the world as pre-modern Americans. The latter feel connected to Christ, not by way of any causal hypotheses about the ultimate etiology of their values, but by way of immediate attunement, which is what the textbook passages were seeking to erode. In representing the Websters as the substance rather than the accident, as the subject rather than the predicate, the textbook was propounding what was religiously discriminatory *ontology*. The religion being impugned by the passage was not a set of values and beliefs, but the background horizon of meaning against which the Websters' values and beliefs made sense to them. The heart of their grievance was not the imposition of a secular belief system to the implied disparagement of a theistic one, as Judge Hand tried to frame it, but the imposition of one spirituality to the exclusion of another.

And yet this imposition is precisely what religious conservatives are at a loss to articulate. Conservative claims of cultural oppression sound extravagant and outlandish because they anthropomorphize into quasi-conspiratorial schemes what is in fact the cultural logic tracked by the mutation counter-narrative. If the claimants seem benighted, they are so, not relative to secular liberals, but relative to the level of philosophical abstraction that is actually required in order to claim cultural oppression cogently. Liberals who would accuse religious conservatives of being incipiently theocratic

¹⁷⁸ Nomi Maya Stolzenberg, "He Drew a Circle that Shut Me Out: Assimilation, Indoctrination, and the Paradox of a Liberal Education," 106 Harv. L. Rev. (1993).

need only stress the fact that the state has not engaged in any act of affirmative hostility or opposition to religion. By contrast, religious conservatives who would expose a “religion of secularism” must also expose the subtraction account as a cultural distortion that conceals the implications of the mutation counter-narrative. And this is a much taller order, which is why conservative claims of culture oppression are here as elsewhere no more than an insurrection of subjugated knowledges.

But this problem is solved by a more fully theorized understanding of the mutation counter-narrative, because it is this that permits us to *conceptualize religious conservatives’ hostility toward secularism in secular rather than religious terms*. While they can always be dismissed as demanding some special deference toward their religious preferences, these demands can always be reframed in secular terms as an expression of human nature’s default mode of consciousness. If the counterculture of the Left called for sexual liberation, so the counterculture of the Right now calls for teleological liberation, for the right to relate to the world in a pre-modern fashion without legal penalty or social stigma. For those standing outside the disciplines and repressions of the buffered identity, secular liberalism is necessarily experienced as a narrow-minded Puritanism that maliciously targets our natural impulses toward teleological thought and feeling. What qualifies as neutrality within the agency-structure of the buffered self is, from within that of the porous one, the imposition of an alien identity—not a Platonic ideal but a particular form of embodied human activity. Thus understood, the separation of church and state is part and parcel of the civilizing process, part and parcel of a disciplinary regime, part and parcel of liberalism’s “hidden curriculum.” The high ideal of religious neutrality is, in its unacknowledged subtext, a policing of social reality that upholds some identities while stigmatizing others. This is what the mutation counter-narrative reveals and the subtraction account conceals, and the reason why that narrative permits conservatism to appropriate liberalism, to become the Left in order to accuse the Left of becoming the Right. The mutation counter-narrative along with the anthropological consensus that corroborates it is to the Establishment Clause what the studies of segregation-induced low self-esteem cited in *Brown v. Board of Education* are to the Equal Protection Clause. Human nature and its cultural development being what they are, what was previously designated as equality—neutrality between believer and non-believer—can perhaps no longer bear that appellation.

Bibliography

- Aleinikoff, Alex T, *A Case for Race Consciousness*, 91 Colum. L. Rev. 1060 (1991).
- Abrams, Kathryn *Sex Wars Redux: Agency and Coercion in Feminist Legal Theory* 95 Colum. L. Rev. 304 (1995).
- Anderson, Brian C., *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005).
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton University Press 2005).
- Arkes, Hadley, "Liberalism and the Law," in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).
- Audi, Robert, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- Austin, Regina, *Sapphire Bound!*, 1989 Wis. L. Rev. 539 (1989).
- Barnett, Randy E., "The Moral Foundations of Modern Libertarianism," in *Varieties of Conservatism in America*, ed. Peter Berkowitz (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004).
- Barrett, William, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1958).
- Becker, Carl L., *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
- Becker, Ernest, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (New York: The Free Press, 1971).
- Becker, Ernest, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).
- Becker, Ernest, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).
- Becker, Lawrence C., *Crimes Against Autonomy: Gerald Dworkin on the Enforcement of Morality*, 40 Wm and Mary L. Rev. 959 (1999).
- Bellah, Robert N., *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- Benhabib, Selya, "Introduction," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- Berger, Peter L. and Luckmann, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1967).
- Berger, Peter, Berger, Brigitte, and Kellner, Hansfried, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
- Berlet, Chip and Lyons, Mathew N., *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2000).
- Bernstein, Anita, *Treating Sexual Harassment with Respect*, 111 Harv. L. Rev. 445 (1997).
- Bérubé, Michael, *What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts?: Classroom Politics and "Bias" in Higher Education* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).
- Bilgrami, Akeel, "What is Enchantment?," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- Billa, Jedediah, *Outnumbered: Chronicles of a Manhattan Conservative* (2011).
- Bloom, Alan, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

- Bork, Robert H., *The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1990).
- Bork, Robert H., *Slouching toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (Regan, 1996).
- Boston, Robert, *Why the Religious Right Is Wrong about Separation of Church and State* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2003).
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge 1977).
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford University Press, 1988).
- Breitbart, Andrew, *Righteous Indignation: Excuse Me While I Save the World* (New York and Boston: Grand Central Publishing, 2001).
- Brooks, David, *Bobos in Paradise: the New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)
- Brown, Wendy and Halley, Janet, *Introduction*, in *Left Legalsim/Left Critique*, eds. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (Duke University Press, 2002).
- Buber, Martin, *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Schocken Books, 1967).
- Burke, Edmund, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O' Brien (Penguin Books, 1968).
- Carr, Craig L., *Between Virtue and Vice: The Legal Enforcement of Morals*, 14-FALL Kan. J. L. & Pub. Pol'y 1 (2004).
- Carter, Stephen L., *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).
- Cassanova, José, "A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- Cicchino, Peter M. *Reason and the Rule of Law: Should Bare Assertions of "Public Morality" Qualify as Legitimate Government Interests for the Purposes of Equal Protection Review*, 87 Geo. L.J. 139 (1998).
- Codevilla, Angelo M., *The Ruling Class: How They Corrupted America and What We Can Do About It* (Beauford Books 2010).
- Connolly, William E., "Belief, Spirituality, and Time," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010),
- Coulter, Ann, *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002).
- Coulter, Ann, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).
- Coulter, Ann, *Guilty: Liberal "Victims" and Their Assault on America* (New York: Three Rivers, 2009).
- Coulter, Ann, *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob Is Endangering America* (New York: Crown Forum, 2011).
- Cover, Robert M., *Nomos and Narrative*, 97 Harv. L. Rev. 1 (1983-1984).
- Cupp, S.E., and Joshpe, Brett, *Why You're Wrong About The Right: Behind The Myths—The Surprising Truth About Conservatives* (New York: Thresholds Editions, 2008).
- Dalrymple, Theodore, *In Praise of Prejudice: The Necessity of Preconceived Ideas* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007).

- De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1997).
- Delchin, Steven A., *Scalia 18:22: Thou Shall Lie with the Academic and Law School Elite: It is an Abomination – Romer v. Evans and America's Culture War*, 47 Case W. Res. 207, 243 (1997).
- Dembroff, Robin A., "The Conservative Gene," in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010).
- Dennett, Daniel C., *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Penguin, 2007).
- D'Souza, Dinesh, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).
- D'Souza, Dinesh, *The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and its Responsibility for 9/11* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007).
- Dworkin, Ronald, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).
- Elias, Norbert, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994).
- Elstain, Jean Bethke, "The Bright Line: Liberalism and Religion," in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).
- Epstein, Richard A., "Libertarianism and Character," in *Varieties of Conservatism in America*, ed. Peter Berkowitz (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004).
- Esbeck, Carl H., *Religion and a Neutral State: Imperative or Impossibility*, 15 Cumb. L. Rev. 67 (1984-85).
- Eskridge, William N. Jr., *Body Politics: Lawrence v. Texas and the Constitution of Disgust and Contagion*, 57, Fla. L. Rev. 1011 (2005).
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E., *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).
- Feinberg, Joel, *Harm to Others* (Oxford University Press, 1984).
- Feinberg, Joel, *Harmless Wrongdoing* (Oxford University Press 1990).
- Feuerbach, Ludwig, *The Essence of Religion*, trans. Alexander Loos (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004).
- Fish, Stanley, *The Trouble With Principle* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- Flagg, Barbara J., *Fashioning a Title VII Remedy for Transparently White Subjective Decisionmaking*, 104 Yale L.J. 2009 (1995).
- Flagg, Barbara J., "Animus" and Moral Disapproval: A Comment on *Romer v. Evans*, 82 Minn. L. Rev. 833 (1997-1998).
- Ford, Richard, *Racial Culture: A Critique* (Princeton University Press 2005).
- Foucault, Michel, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).
- Foucault, Michel, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).
- Frank, Thomas, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2005).
- Gallagher, Mike, *50 Things Liberals Love to Hate* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2012).
- Gawley, Christopher J., *A Requiem for Morality: A Response to Peter M. Cicchino*, 30 Cap. U. L. Rev. 711 (2002).

- Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Fontana Press, 1993).
- Gelernter, David, *America-Lite: How Imperial Academia Dismantled Our Culture (and Ushered In the Obamacrats)* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012).
- Gey, Steven G., *This is not a Flag: The Aesthetics of Desecration*, 1990 Wis. L. Rev. 1549 (1990).
- Gey, Steven G., *Free Will, Religious Liberty, and a Partial Defense of the French Approach to Religious Expression in Public Schools*, 42 Hous. L. Rev. 1 (2005)
- Gillsespie, Michael Allen, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (The University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- Goldberg, Jonah, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
- Goldberg, Jonah, "Introduction," in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010).
- Goldberg, Jonah, *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas* (Sentinel 2012).
- Göle, Nilüfer, "The Civilizational, Spatial, and Sexual Powers of the Secular," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- Gouldner, Alvin W., *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979).
- Graglia, F. Carolyn, *Domestic Tranquility: A Brief Against Feminism* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1998).
- Graglia, Lino A., *Romer v. Evans: The People Foiled Again by the Constitution*, 68 U. Colo. L. Rev 409 (1997).
- Gray, John, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: The New Press, 2000).
- Gray, John, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007).
- Guignon, Charles B., *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge* (Indianapolis, IN: Hacket Publishing Company, 1983).
- Gutman, Amy and Thompson, Dennis, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- Haidt, Jonathan, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).
- Hannity, Sean, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty over Liberalism* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).
- Harden, Nathan, "The Girls I Knew at Yale," in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010).
- Harris, Lee, *The Next American Civil War: The Populist Revolt Against the Liberal Elite* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).
- Hegel, G.F.W., *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953).
- Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (HarperSanFrancisco, 1962).
- Henrie, Mark. C. "Understanding Traditionalist Conservatism," in *Varieties of Conservatism in America*, ed. Peter Berkowitz (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004).

- Hirschman, Albert O., *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).
- Himmelfarb, Gertrude, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York, Vintage Books, 1994).
- Himmelfarb, Gertrude, *One Nation, Two Cultures: A Searching Examination of American Society in the Aftermath of Our Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).
- Himmelfarb, Gertrude, "The Other Culture War," in *Is There A Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*, eds. E.J. Dionne Jr. and Michael Cromartie (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).
- Hobbes, Thomas, *Man and Citizen*, trans. C.T. Wood, ed. B Gert (Indianapolis, IN: Hacket Publishing Company, 1991).
- Hofstadter, Richard, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).
- Hofstadter, Richard, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).
- Horowitz, David and Laskin, Jacob, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America's Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009).
- Horowitz, David, *Indoctrination U.: The Left's War Against Academic Freedom* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009).
- Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. J.B. Schneewind (Indianapolis, IN: Hacket Publishing Company, 1983).
- Hunter, James Davison, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Basic Books 1991).
- Hunter, James Davison and Wolfe, Alan, *Is There A Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*, eds. E.J. Dionne Jr. and Michael Cromartie (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).
- Ingber, Stanley, *Religion or Ideology: A Need Clarification of the Religion Clauses*, 41 Stan. L. Rev. 233 (1989)
- Ingraham, Laura, *Shut Up & Sing: How Elites from Hollywood, Politics, and the UN Are Subverting America* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2003).
- Ingraham, Laura, *Power to the People* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2007).
- Jacoby, Susan, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).
- Johnson, Alex M., *Bid Whist, Tonk and United States v. Fordice: Why Integrationism Fails African-Americans Again*, 81 Cal. L. Rev. 1401.
- Jost, John T.; Glaser, Jack; Kruglanski, Arie W.; Sulloway, Frank J, *Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition*, Psychological Bulletin, Vol 129(3), May 2003, 339-375.
- Kabaservice, Geoffrey, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
- Kagan, Robert, "Liberalism and American Foreign Policy" in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).
- Kahan, Dan M. *The Cognitively Illiberal State*, 60 Stan. L. Rev. 115, 135 (2007).
- Kahane, David, *Rules for Radical Conservatives: Beating the Left at Its Own Game to Take Back America* (Ballantine Books, 2010).
- Katz, Justin, "A Nonconforming Reconstruction," in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010).

- Kimball, Roger, "Mill, Stephen, and the Nature of Freedom," in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).
- Kimball, Roger, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998).
- Kimball, Roger, *The Long March: How the Culture Revolution of the 1960s Changed America* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000).
- Kirchick, James, "The Consistency of Gay Conservatives," in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010).
- Kirk, Russell, *The Conservative Mind* (BN Publishing, 2008).
- Kolakowski, Leszek, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- Kors, Alan Charles, "Bad Faith: The Politicization of the University In Loco Parentis," in *The Imperiled Academy* 153, 165, ed. Howard Dickman (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993).
- Kors, Alan Charles and Silvergate, Harvey A., *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999).
- Kramnick, Isaac, and Moore, R. Laurence, *The Godless Constitution: A Moral Defense of the Secular State* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005).
- Kristol, Irving The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals, *Encounter*, October 1979, 5-14.
- Kymlicka, Will, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 1995).
- Lakoff, George, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (The University of Chicago Press 2002).
- Lakoff, George, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (Viking, 2008).
- Lasch, Christopher, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).
- Lasch, Christopher, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995).
- Lawrence, Charles, *The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism*, 39 Stan. L. Rev. 317 (1987).
- Laycock, Douglas, *The Religion Clauses: Substantive Neutrality*, 110 W. Va. L. Rev. 51.
- Lessig, Lawrence, *The Regulation of Social Meaning*, 62 U. Chi. L. Rev. 943 (1995).
- Limbaugh, David, *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2004).
- Lilla, Mark, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).
- London, Herbert, *America's Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008).
- Lukes, Steven, *Relativism in its Place*, in *Rationality and Relativism Rationality and Relativism*, eds. M. Hollis and S. Lukes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982).
- Macedo, Stephen, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000).

- MacIntyre, Alisdair, *After Virtue* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press 1984).
- MacKinnon, Catherine A., *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- MacKinnon, Catherine A., "Sexuality," in *Campus Wars* 71, 72, eds. John Arthur and Amy Shapiro (1995).
- Madison, James, *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*, 2 Writings of James Madison (G. Hunt ed. 1901)
- Mahmood, Saba, "Can Secularism be Other-wise?," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- Malkin, Michelle, *Unhinged: Exposing Liberals Gone Wild* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005).
- Mansfield, Harvey C., *Manliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
- Marshall, William P., *The Other Side of Religion*, 44 Hastings L.J. 843 (1993).
- Martin, Jerry L., "The University as Agent of Social Transformation: The Postmodern Argument Considered," in *The Imperiled Academy* 203, ed. Howard Dickman (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993).
- McCluskey, Martha T., *How Equality Became Elitist: The Cultural Politics of Economics from the Court to the "Nanny Wars"*, 35 Seton Hall L. Rev. 1291 (2005).
- McConnell, Michael, *Religious Freedom at a Crossroads*, 59 U Chi. L. Rev. 115 (1992).
- McConnell, Michael, "God is Dead and We Have Killed Him!": *Freedom of Religion in the Post-modern Age*, 1993 B.Y.U.L. Rev. 163 (1993).
- McWhorter, John, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (Harper Perennial, 2001).
- Metha, Uday S., *Liberal Strategies of Exclusion*, 18 Pol. & Soc'y 427 (1990).
- Midgley, Mary, *Wisdom, Information, and Wonder: What is Knowledge for?* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).
- Midgley, Mary, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
- Mooney, Chris, *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).
- Mouffe, Chantal, "Democracy Power, and the 'Political,'" in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- Murphy, Jeffrie G., *Moral Reasons and the Limitation of Liberty*, 40 Wm. And Mary L. Rev. 947 (1999).
- Murray, Charles, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012).
- Nagel, Thomas, *Moral Questions* (Cambridge University Press 1991).
- Nash, George H., *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006).
- Nicol, Caitrin, "Immersion Experience," in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010).

- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1969).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books 1974).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books 1989).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin Books, 1990).
- Nongbri, Brent, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 20013).
- Nunberg, Geoffrey, *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left Wing Freak Show* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007).
- Nussbaum, Martha C., *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2004).
- Oakeshot, Michael, *On Being Conservative*.
- O'Reilly, Bill, *Culture Warrior* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007).
- O'Sullivan, John, "The Moral Consequence of Impatience," in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).
- Paglia, Camille, *Vamps & Tramps* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).
- Peller, Gary, *Race Consciousness*, 1990 Duke L.J. 758 (1990).
- Phillips, Anne, "Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas, or a Politics of Presence?," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- Pineau, Lois A., *Date Rape: A Feminist Analysis*, in *MORALITY AND MORAL CONTROVERSIES*, ed. John Arthur (1989).
- Pinker, Steven, *The Blank Slate* (New York: Viking Press, 2002).
- Pollack, Joel B., "A Frank Exchange: The Tale of My Political Conversion," in *Proud to be Right: Voices of the Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg (New York: Harper, 2010).
- Post, Robert, *Law and Cultural Conflict*, 78 Chi.-Kent L. Rev. 485 (2003).
- Poulos, James, *The Leptogonians: Growing Up Conservative in a Disrupted Decade*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation* (Jonah Goldberg ed., Harper, New York 2010).
- Ravitch, Diane, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).
- Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- Rawls, John, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
- Rittelmeyer, Helen, *The Smoker's Code*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010).
- Robin, Corey *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
- Rorty, Richard, *Contingency , Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

- Ross, Thomas, *Innocence and Affirmative Action*, [43 Vand. L. Rev. 297, 310](#) (1990).
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956).
- Savage, Michael, *The Savage Nation: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on Our Borders, Language, and Culture* (Plume 2002).
- Savage, Michael, *The Enemy Within: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on our Schools, Faith, and Military* (Thomas Nelson, 2003).
- Scheler, Max, *Ressentiment*, trans. Lewis B. Coser and William W. Holdheim (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010).
- Schweizer, Peter, *Do As I Say (Not As I Do): Profiles in Liberal Hypocrisy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005).
- Scruton, Roger, "Rousseau and the Origins of Liberalism" in *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster The Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control*, eds. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).
- Scruton, Roger, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002).
- Searle, John R., *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).
- Seavey, Todd *Conservatism for Punks*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation*, ed. Jonah Goldberg, (New York: Harper, 2010).
- Shapiro, Ben, *Why I'm Glad Liberals Are Bullies*, in *Proud To Be Right: Voices Of The Next Conservative Generation* (Jonah Goldberg ed., Harper, New York 2010).
- Shapiro, Ben, *Bullies: How the Left's Culture of Fear and Intimidation Silences America* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2013).
- Smith, Steven D., *Is the Harm Principle Illiberal?*, [51 Am. J. Juris. 1](#) (2006).
- Smith, Stephen D. *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- Sommers, Christina Hoff, *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).
- Sommers, Christina Hoff, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000).
- Sommers, Christina Hoff and Satel, Sally M.D., *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture is Eroding Self-Reliance*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2005).
- Sowell, Thomas, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (Basic Books, 1995).
- Sowell, Thomas, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (Basic Books, 2002).
- Sowell, Thomas, *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (Encounter Books, 2005).
- Sowell, Thomas, *Intellectuals and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
- St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Albert C. Outler (Dover 2002).
- St. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company)
- Stearns, Peter N., *Battleground of Desire: The Struggle for Self-Control in Modern America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
- Steele, Shelby, *The Content of Our Character* (St. Martin's Press, 1990).

- Steele, Shelby, *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006).
- Stolzenberg, Nomi Maya, *The Return of the Repressed: Illiberal Groups in a Liberal State*, 12 J. Contemp. Legal Issues 897.
- Stolzenberg, Nomi Maya, "He Drew a Circle that Shut Me Out: Assimilation, Indoctrination, and the Paradox of a Liberal Education", 106 Harv. L. Rev. (1993).
- Stolzenberg, Nomi, "The Profanity of Law," in *Law and the Sacred*, eds. Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, and Martha Merrill Umphrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).
- Stolzenberg, Nomi, *Theses on Secularism*, 47 San Diego L. Rev. 1041 (2010).
- Sullivan, Kathleen M., *Religion and Liberal Democracy*, 59 U. Chi. L. Rev. 195 (1992).
- Taylor, Charles, *Philosophical Papers Volume 1: Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge, 1985).
- Taylor, Charles, *Philosophical Papers Volume 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, University Press, 1985).
- Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- Taylor, Charles, *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard University Press, 1995).
- Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).
- Tribe, Laurence. *American Constitutional Law* (2d ed. 1988)
- Tribe, Laurence, *Lawrence v. Texas: The "Fundamental Right" That Dare Not Speak Its Name*, 117 Harv. L. Rev. 1893 (2004).
- Trilling, Lionel, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008).
- Waldron, Jeremy, Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 147 (Apr. 1987), 127, 144.
- Wax, Amy L., *The Conservative's Dilemma: Traditional Institutions, Social Change, and Same-Sex Marriage*, 42 San Diego L. Rev. 1059 (2005).
- Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, (Dover, 2003).
- West, Robin L., *The Difference in Women's Hedonic Lives: A Phenomenological Critique of Feminist Legal Theory*, 15 Wis. Women's L.J. 149 (2000).
- Westen, Drew, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007).
- Wilson, David Sloan, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).
- Wilson, John K., *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education* (Duke University Press, 1995).
- Winch, Peter, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Rationality*, ed. Brian Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).
- Winch, Peter, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 1990).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Pearson, 1973).

CASES

- *Lochner v. New York*, 198 U.S. 45 (U.S. 1905).
- *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943).
- *Prince v. Massachusetts*, 321 U.S. 158 (U.S. 1944).
- *United States v. Ballard*, 322 U.S. 78 (U.S. 1944).
- *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1 (U.S. 1947).
- *Engle v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421, 422 (U.S. 1962).
- *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (U.S. 1963)
- *Board of Education of Cent. School District No. 1 v. Allen*, 392 U.S. 236 (U.S. 1968).
- *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (U.S. 1971).
- *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972).
- *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984)
- *Grove v. Mead School Dist.*, 753 F.2d 1528 (9th Cir. Wash. 1985).
- *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (U.S. 1985).
- *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186 (1986).
- *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 655 F. Supp 939 (S.D. Ala. 1987).
- *Smith v. Board of Sch. Commr's*, 827 F.2d 684 (11th Cir. Ala. 1987).
- *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397 (U.S., 1989).
- *County of Allegheny v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573 (U.S. 1989).
- *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992).
- *Lee v. Weisman*, [505 U.S. 577](#) (U.S. 1992).
- *Board of Education of Kiryas Joel School District v. Grumet*, 512 U.S. 687 (1994).
- *United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515 (U.S. 1996)
- *Romer v. Evans*, 517 U.S. 620, 652 (1996).
- *Good News Club v. Milford Central School*, 533 U. S. 98 (U.S. 2001).
- *Lawrence v. Texas*, 537 U.S. 558 (2003).
- *Locke v. Davey*, 540 U.S. 712 (U.S. 2004).
- *McCreary County v. ACLU of Kentucky*, 545 U.S. 844 (2005).