

How I Am A Conservative

Part 1: Political

SECTION 1.

I have been regarding myself as rather a conservative these past few years. I am reminded of something I overheard once: that young people are, and must be, progressive, and those in their advancing years are, and similarly must be, conservative. There is some truth to such an idea, but probably not enough to save it from being a platitude. Certainly I do not see how it applies to me. I am the same person I was thirty years ago; what has changed, in this respect, is my understanding of terms.

What does it mean to be conservative? How do we tease apart the term conservative from the political parties which embraced, or else set themselves in opposition to, this term? What does it mean when a "conservative" party supports the oppression of a subset of people solely on identitarian characteristics, and, simultaneously, a "liberal" party does exactly the same thing across the pond? We would do well to try, as best we can, to separate the language co-opted by political ideologies from lasting ideas. To arrive at my recent understanding of myself as a conservative, I tried to do just this.

I must say that, today, the American political party which associates itself with conservatism does not appear to be understandable as a single political entity. It is too difficult for a person like me, who has a layman's grasp of political science, to compare today's conservative party to what it was a generation ago, and to square those historic concerns with its behavior and stance today. The party of responsibility and duty -- thinking itself unpopular because adherence to principles is uncomfortable and grim -- bears little resemblance to the single-principle "party" of the present. (Its sole principle today, as far as I can tell, is: win, and hold power, at whatever cost necessary.) It is in part a discomfort with the loss of a conservative political movement and healthy opposition party that prompts me to examine the conservatism in myself.

I start by trying to define what conservatism means. What is it to be a conservative? Clearly, it implies conservation. But conservation of what? To conserve anything blindly for its own sake is madness. It must imply conservation of the good, the positive, the helpful, the expedient, the felicitous, the righteous; these take the form of ideas and habits which benefit us today, when applied to our own time and context; they lift us up, and, in the end, result in some better state. Unlike hoarders, collectors and conservationists conserve in order to attain some specific good. And a conservative who conserves in order to make things worse does not deserve the appellation.

Of course, if we are to accept such a framing of the conservative, our first and last difficulty will be to arrive at some understanding of what these good, positive things might be. If one person's definition of felicity is in direct opposition to another's, we've not contributed anything to our definition of conservatism. We remain as lost as before, without any definition to guide us.

My approach to finding a way forward is to apply reason, as best I can, in order to arrive at valid, but also general, principles and patterns that might help me to arrive at some sense of what these goods might be. Using reason in this fashion isn't to everyone's taste, and I respect the observation that reason, when used in isolation, has its limits in making sense of the world. Faith and spiritual insight are important to human knowledge, but, powerful as these may be, they are limited in what they can discover. As is the case with feelings, one no longer relies on faith alone to explain how things work or have come to be, nor to derive universal conclusions. I am interested in structuring an argument, even if it must contain within it a set of personal beliefs, by basing as much as I can on derived conclusions. So, I shall set aside any faith for the purpose of this topic, and try to rest as many ideas as I can on the platform of reason -- a platform which has the desirable characteristic of being able to identify its own limits.

What can reason say about good things? For one, reason can be used to apply, or practice, behaviors considered to be good. Additionally, reason can derive a basis for some of these behaviors.

For example, the very practical Golden Rule dictates that, in our social relations, it is good and right to behave toward others in the way you would want them to behave toward you. One looks inward in order to determine the rightness of one's outward actions, by posing a what-if scenario to oneself. A common formulation is, do unto others what you would have them do unto you. And one needs to apply reason to work this out -- mere feelings can't properly model what-if scenarios.

The good thing for the conservative to preserve in this instance is a good idea: practice the Golden Rule. Its etiology is not so important to my point; more important is the observation that its practice is associated with social harmony, peaceable relations, and stability. And it's so straightforward that even teenagers, whose capacity to reason is yet to fully mature, can rationally come up with its formulation. For those engaged in advanced corners of reason, a mathematical explanation for the stability that is observed to accompany the practice of the Golden Rule can be logically proven and modeled. We come to understand that it falls into a category of mathematically stable strategies: the maths themselves -- a core element of reason -- predict its stability.

Already, I've introduced normative content regarding the good. I have mentioned stability and peace as being good, and I have implied that some ideas can be good: the truth, and seeking it, are good. These are truisms for me, and although I find that they work well in supporting my contention of being a conservative, can we say there is universality to these goods? Must they be good, and are they good for everyone, always?

Quickly, we find that general positive statements concerning the good are problematic. Almost always, they are questionable. One of the most courageous writers to have waded into positive statements about morality and justice -- all on the basis of reason -- was Plato, but even his prescriptions are difficult for modern-day societies to accept. Prophets such as Jesus Christ were more successful in their positive prescriptions, though one may argue that these too are difficult for today's public to accept. If one is to rely solely on reason, however, it is easier to justify reason's negative conclusions about what is good -- in other words, what not to do. This isn't to imply that negative boundaries are the only ones with which we should grapple, just that, for the sake of progressing a discussion on good things, they are perhaps the most suitable to start with. Most people accept reason's dictate to avoid making false promises, for example. From where do these negative precepts obtain their validity?

I shall make a case for these negative statements, which define actions that are *not* good, by introducing a simple, but also normative, statement about a good: it's a good thing to treat things as they are. Another way one might say this is, it is good to understand the reality of a thing, and treat the thing accordingly. We can think of this as a virtue of fidelity. I am not deriving this virtue in this essay, just presenting it as a first premise, or else, a high virtue in my own ethical system.

With this premise in hand, I shall try to sketch out a rough table depicting us humans, as we are. (This, of course, means as I understand us to be.) I start with the assertion that we are human, and attempt to abstract on this category of being. Every object can be referred to by a number of abstractions: for example, a ball-shaped toy can be referred to as a ball, and so also a sphere. Humans too can be referred to in similar ways. Abstraction, though often ill-arrived and invalid, can sometimes help us see things as they are. Below, in the first column, I list a category of being to which we humans belong, in descending order of generalization, and in the second, one or more of its essential characteristics -- key aspects of the category that differentiate it, and would not necessarily be present in the levels above. My premise is that treating a thing in a way that respects what it essentially is, is a good thing to do, and doing the opposite not good. As mentioned before, it is easiest to see this as a negative, or restrictive, position: as a moral command or imperative, we should formulate it as "all things being equal, one must not breach another's natural rights."

A very rough, incomplete sketch of us as:

	Category of Being	Essential Characteristics
1	Spatio-Temporal Object	Occupying space and time
2	Organic Lifeform	Living, genetically propagating information
3	Animal	Sexual reproduction, aerobic respiration, competitiveness
4	Mammal	Nursing, hygiene, interspecies bonding
5	Primate	Inequity aversion, advanced socialization
6	Human	Reasoning, perfectibility, planning, artifice

What, exactly, is a right? Perhaps we might think of a right as, simply, something that is morally right for a moral agent to respect in another. If so, and if we are to accept the aforementioned virtue of fidelity, then the second column directly translates into what we might think of as our natural rights. We didn't need someone to give us these rights; we all have them already. These are the rights that we have by virtue of *being*....an animal, or a primate, or spatial object. We do not expect animals or young children to concern themselves with moral matters, and even some adults may not care about what is morally right or wrong; that's another matter. For those that do, however, breaching any of these natural rights involves a moral question. All things being equal, it would be morally wrong to take away another moral agent's ability to occupy space, for example, as it would breach that individual's right *as a* 3D object. Some Abrahamic codes derive from natural rights: 'thou shalt not kill' derives directly from row 2. False promises are a form of deceit, and fall afoul of our inequity aversion, identified in row 5.

But all things are not equal. As presented in the last row, we modern humans, like our ancient hominid ancestors, have the unique quality of engaging in constant self-development. We do not sit still; we improve on our creations, and ourselves, within our lifetimes, and use reason's faculties of foresight and language to pass on our knowledge for future generations to build upon. As a part of that evolution of knowledge and artifice, we created rules of behavior for ourselves that were not necessarily derivable from nature. The artifice that developed within social groups and societies yielded new notions of right -- ones that, when viewed from our current time, do not necessarily comply with modern ideals of duty and right action: fealty to tribal leaders, primogeniture, even obligations of ritual violence were invented by humans, and accepted as moral duties, and are associated with their accompanying rights.

These artificial notions of right action often conflict with rights I am calling natural. They are more often than not practical, at least seen to be so from the perspective of community survival, and, as with natural rights, repercussions for violation can be dire. What I am speaking of are more than just rules that one could follow, or perhaps skip in a risky moment of insouciance. They are seen as the right thing to do within their respective social realities, with potentially fatal consequences for transgression. In this way, when examined from his cultural context, the tribal leader's position and privileges are first class rights accorded him by the norms of his society.

With this conceit in hand -- that some of our rights are derivable from who we are, and others invented by us, contextualized by specific times and places -- how would enumerated rights from something like the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights line up? Can we distinguish between natural and normative rights?

Let's compare two examples.

Article 9: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile.

I see this as derivable from line 5, that is, directly from our nature -- we are creatures born with a strong sense of inequity aversion, a quality we share with other primates. Chimps will reject arbitrarily assigned benefits when they believe to be functioning within a (fair) social system. You could venture to any culture at any time, and encounter strong objections to perceived unfairness. This is a universal hominin quality, all children exhibit it, it is part of who we are, and rights derived from it are truly universal.

Article 21, §1: Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

This does not appear to have any derivation from our nature. There are no rows in the table above on which we can ground this right. It is inapplicable to most of the history of humanity, during which terms like "country" and "freedom" were entirely alien concepts. In most historic circumstances it would have been regarded as foolhardy, possibly insane, and its universal implementation would likely have resulted in the speedy dissolution of the societies in which it was attempted, perishing either at the hands of rival societies which knew better, or else as a result of their own dysfunction.

Article 21 only makes sense under certain conditions -- conditions which came into being very recently. If we take a step back and pinpoint when these conditions appeared on civilizations' timelines, it looks as though they came about just yesterday. This points to an important consideration for engaging in comparative evaluations of rights and norms: we must come to understand them only from the perspective of their context. To project the norms of a specific culture, at a specific time, on to other times and peoples, is a blight to the virtue of fidelity. It is a scourge to lucid deliberation, and paves a fast track to nonsense.

The conditions that are required for Article 21, and for many other rights and norms we think of as obvious and "universal", came into existence only after Western civilization took root, and flourished sufficiently as to have supported the rational underpinnings of universal political equality -- equality based not on birthright, talent, or fortune, but on moral capacity. One of the earliest and most eloquent proponents of this idea proposed that it should only apply to men with a specific minimum amount of leasable property in their possession, in this way excluding most of the population. We may find such a requirement to be so exclusive as to barely deserve an association with what we think of as political equality today. Yet, when first expressed, this idea was so radical that it put the author's life in danger. It also served as a philosophical root in the founding of America, and predated it only by a few decades.

In many cases, normative commands or duties can be traced to a practical requirement arising from specific environmental concerns. We see, for example, ancient laws from the time of Noah, prohibiting the eating of living flesh, or kosher dietary laws, with their own set of restrictions. These make practical sense if we look at them in the light of the circumstances in which they originated. But they make little rational sense from a universal perspective. Very often, we find that normative commands of one culture directly contradict those of another culture. The Hindu law prohibiting the consumption of beef, for example, seems arbitrary when viewed side by side with a contrasting society's cultural or religious prohibitions against eating pork. Often, restrictive laws in one culture contradict duties in another. One culture commands what another prohibits. This can occur simultaneously within a single society or nation, and we find examples of this today, in most large societies. In ancient, hyper-diverse societies such as those of India, such conflicts are particularly striking.

A more recent example of a normative right is the right to privacy, sometimes referred to as a "universal" right. It does not derive from anything in our nature. It was unneeded and unheard of for most of humanity. My native tongue doesn't even have a word for it; it is awkwardly translated as "the right to the

non-touching of one's personal life." The translation hints at a contextual requirement for this right: the existence of a life distinct from, and outside of, the social sphere -- a personal life, itself a new development in human societies. The right to privacy is more often than not a *de facto* secondary right; when violated, one encounters a separate primary right or duty being breached.

Imagine for a moment a fictional contrivance, a Cone Of Inconsequence, similar to the Cone of Silence in the 1960's spy comedy *Get Smart*. Anyone can see through this transparent cone, but all activity taking place within it would result in absolutely no consequence. If a modern teenager could walk into such a cone and take advantage of its powers, her demand to a right to privacy would take a different form, and be far less vocal and immediate. If she could engage in activities which cause no harm to others, but are thought to be well outside the norm by her peers, or objectionable to those with authority over her, and yet neither peers nor authority figures behaved any differently as a result -- indeed, she would not discover, directly or indirectly, whether or not anyone even observed the behavior -- we might see how our current demands to a right to privacy differ from requirements of solitude or confidentiality. Solitude is a requirement for health. Confidentiality is a requirement for planning. But our demands for privacy are different from these, in that we demand this right as a *secondary* right, in order to protect ourselves from *other* harms for which we have scant defense, seldom directly for its own sake.

The vocal demand for this "right" comes out of the inhuman conditions we find ourselves living in as a result of our partially developed, yet quickly changing, civilization. I believe that it is, like the right to free speech (or, freedom of thought), but a leaf of another right, one whose roots run far deeper: the right to authenticity, otherwise stated as the right to be oneself. In sufficiently advanced societies of the distant future, ones that truly respect individuals' right to authenticity, rights to privacy and freedom of speech are superfluous. Societies which require such rights are simply undeveloped as liberal societies -- they have not matured sufficiently such that current laws cohere with Western liberalism's philosophical roots. Such societies have yet to overcome the atavistic practice of shaming, a practice that stands directly in the way of individuals' abilities to explore and develop their authentic selves.

I am not saying that a right to privacy is unnecessary in our day and age. Today, it seems to be a right that is crucial to protecting us from extrajudicial harms. It is the zoo-like existence we find ourselves living in, intertwined with civilization's constantly changing normative social demands, that requires the invention of new rights. Many, if not most of the rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are such rights. They are correctives -- reactions to, and therefore only applicable to, realities of societies which have developed to a sufficient degree along the path that civilization has set. And they only make sense in light of the oppressive, pathological demands with which civilization burdens us in its constantly accelerating development. The confluence of free capitalism and technological advancement continually churns out new normative demands, and we require such additional correctives today.

We might imagine a day, in the not-too-distant future, when a new right is demanded -- one that protects our ability to use existing muscle memory and knowledge to perform the quotidian functions of running one's life. With every passing year, we find ourselves having to re-learn how to use our computers and smartphones, how to replace and interact with the services we have come to rely on, and how to discover the knowledge we need in order to live our lives as modernity intends. If one has to constantly, over months rather than generations, re-learn which controls to interact with and which to avoid, in what order; what new behaviors (unrequested and unwanted) our tools require of us; which new hidden traps or deceptive schemes to be aware of; what new linguistic peculiarities to assimilate; what new interdependencies or incompatibilities to address; or how to adapt to the remarkable loss of tool intent-outcome compliance (when the tool does not do what the user intends or expects); merely to get through the day in one piece, one might question whether one is really living in a progressed civilization. Such conditions, and so many others, make inhuman demands of our lives. They do not line up at all with anything of humanly value, do not square with the tempo and rhythm of human psychology, and can create conditions of near insanity. If enough people are subject to such conditions, it could deprive the demos of critical resources, resources that allow members to think properly on, among other things, questions of the public good.

Civilization can be seen to have a kind of watchworks, a kind of mechanism that drives the behavior of societies enveloped within it. This "civilizing mechanism," if viewed from a sufficient distance, seems to follow a pattern: it prefers, and gives primacy to, reason over instinct. The civilizing function is primarily dependent on two variables -- population density and time. Time is asymmetrical -- its arrow only points in one direction; this combines with humans' perfectibility to yield the continuing technological and social changes, often referred to as "progress", that we have observed over several millennia. And since our nature has allowed us to enjoy remarkable (but, as always, temporary) existential success, human population has skyrocketed. These two effects -- constant accumulation of knowledge and technical advancement, along with population explosion -- forces the civilizing function into its overall appearance: if we tried to plot it, it would appear as a curve which weighs the scientific over the (imperfect) superstitious, the docile over the aggressive, the inclusive over the exclusive. (It also rationalizes using the other meaning of the word: it reorganizes and assimilates for efficiency.) Whether contriving rational justifications for traditional but irrational norms, as medieval philosophers in the West had done, or developing new norms based on pure reason, civilization's arc leans toward the Apollonian, away from the Dionysian. It appears that the Dionysian is ineffective and unworkable under the synthetic conditions that civilization itself has wrought, in order to sustain the kinds of population densities we are beginning to observe.

This points to a core difference between progressives and conservatives. Both agree on this arrow: it's hard to find a conservative today who rejects the idea that humans cannot ever be treated as the property of another, even though advanced civilizations only recently began to accept and incorporate this idea as a standard norm. One does not often encounter a serious conservative who believes that a totally urbanized society of billions can maintain stability by basing security institutions on the model of private militias. How often do we find a conservative who still holds that the creation of the Federal Reserve was both unconstitutional and unnecessary? Tradition, convention, ritual, habit -- all are rejected by conservatives if a given practice or belief is no longer relevant, beneficial, or understood to be rational. From a political perspective, the key difference between progressives and conservatives is their opinion on the *rate* of change -- the speed with which this arrow is implemented. (Oftentimes, their differences appear to reduce to being little more than disagreements on speculations about which administrative approach would best yield some particular result.) The conservative wants to slow down the rate at which new norms, with their reasonable-seeming justifications, take root and oppress our irrational, animal natures, while the progressive wants to speed this up. The conservative does this by conserving what is *still* good in the practice of existing, past practices, norms, and ideas. In this way, we might say that the conservative respects humans as their nature has allowed them to adapt until now, and the progressive respects and relies on humans' remarkable qualities of changeability and adaptation to alter aspects of their nature in order to keep up with civilization's latest demands.

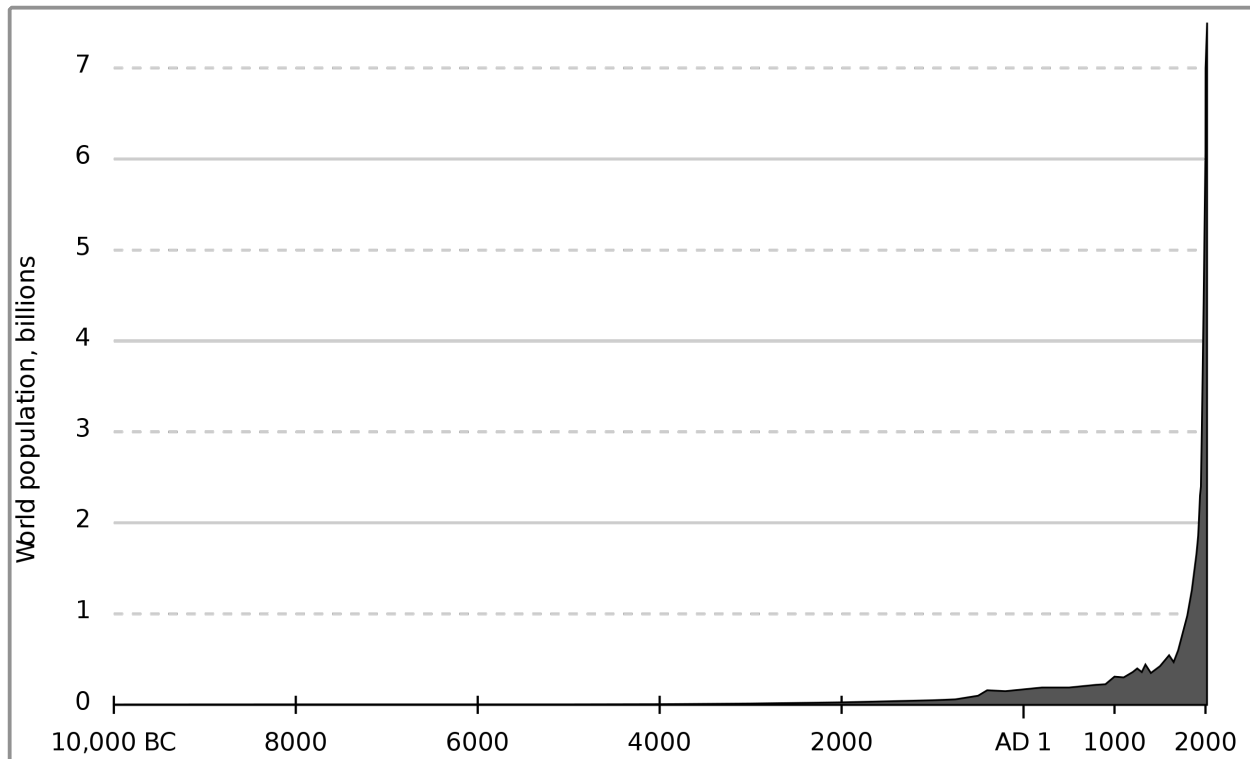
To flesh out this idea of civilization being a unidirectional movement toward a purely rational existence, we should ask what the ultimate end of such an evolution might be. What would it look like, if a society of tens or hundreds of billions were ever to reach it? In my interpretation of John Lennon's song "Imagine", I see precisely this end described. He sings of a condition in which there are no countries, no religion, of people "living for the world." I am interested in understanding who these "people" could be, realistically. When I picture them, I see that they have no Dionysian quality remaining in them. They are free of all cognitive biases -- no confirmation biases, framing effects, or fundamental attribution errors here! Unlike human infants, infants born into this world do not prefer light-skinned over dark-skinned faces. These are likely to be hominids who have speciated from modern humans, by way of mutation, adaptation, artificial selection, and genetic engineering -- the first synthetic hominids, and the first to properly do away with anything we might call inequality. They do not need property or faith, because they are entirely rational. They "live for all the world" not because they follow the Christian command, but because they respect the Platonic derivation. They have no law enforcement, because there is no need for laws. They have perfect trust in one another, because they know that they are *all* perfectly rational as a species. As such, they have nothing that we might call personal preferences, and no need for anything we would comfortably call art. The violence inherent to humans is absent, and with it, anything we might

recognize as sports. They are in a state of total self-domestication, with their path toward sexual monomorphism complete. And, to be absolutely clear, barring a (likely) collapse of our civilizations, and perhaps even species, I believe this *is* the future. For me, "Imagine" is neither a political song, nor a dystopian one; it is a song of *sci-fi vérité*. Whether it takes one thousand years to speciate, or fifty thousand, this end is precisely the end toward which civilization's arrow is pointing.

The problem, of course, is that we *are* human, and the demands of an ever more perfectly rational, and rationalized, existence are impossible to fulfill, at least not with the universality expected by contemporary civilized norms. We humans give the appearance of being able to meet these demands, as we are remarkable in our abilities to adapt, to mimic, to create mental frameworks that help us to endure a myriad of oppressions and environments inappropriate for felicity. But such demands are accompanied by social, psychological, and physical illnesses. Our ability to adapt so smoothly and quickly is an illusion. By understanding ourselves in this way, we can become better able to identify the causes and catalysts of political instability.

Why should we expect a small, stable, democratic nation, with its own culture going back a millennia, to accept an influx of other-looking, other-sounding peoples with foreign value systems, and to instantly embrace and trust them, as neighbors, as partners in the nation's defense, as equally invested contributors toward public prosperity? Our natures, after all, are not built to do this, and cannot change at nearly the rate that such trusting acceptance of the alien would require. Studies show time and again that shared ethical standards are a minimal requirement for successful self-organization. Yet somehow, we rely, and in some ways demand, that the native population all, as a nation, just get over their "broken" (read: irrational) sides of their natures, and direct their rational, and therefore "just", portions of their natures to reign and accept foreigners as trustworthy partners. The unspoken assumption must be that the newcomers share the same social development, value system, and inclination to apply reason to their political wills, such that the overall Will of the People -- that is, that which supports the social contract of the nation -- doesn't so significantly change as to become unworkable. This is an unsupportable assumption. A sizable cohort of immigrants needs at least a generation, often more, to adapt to the value system and norms of a new home. If they don't, and isolate by creating cultural barriers (e.g., rejecting the language, flipping the values hierarchy, blocking cultural diffusion), social strife will be long-lived; if they do, though the strife will not last as long, the people will experience it nevertheless.

A word about the civilizing function's arrow. Nature teaches us that most everything is wave-like, and here too we mustn't expect rational normative changes to always increase steadily, or linearly. We should expect the arrow's forward movement, as with so many other movements, to have rushes and reversals, peaks and troughs. Indeed, it is the conservative that, according to my understanding, is ostensibly most often responsible for the troughs. But both the conservative and progressive must accept two things: that nature abhors stasis, and population growth and technical advancement, taken together, do not move the civilizing needle backwards. In other words, they must accept that, from a big picture perspective, traditional norms, if they are irrational, must eventually disappear with time and increased population density. The caveat to this concerns time itself: as a species, we have been around several hundred thousand years, our ancestors with whom we share most of our instincts and aptitudes millions of years, and the idea of political equality founded on the capacity to reason started gaining popularity just the other day. It was accompanied by extreme population explosion and consequent depletion of natural resources. All of this is happening not at the speed of nature, but at the speed of man. The progressive says, let's get on with it, and change ourselves as needed! Adapt and change, even if doing so merely supports an illusion of rationally grounded civility. The conservative says, hang on a sec, let's take a breath. We just can't keep up.



The norms and duties that human societies develop on top of our natural rights often stand in opposition to them. In practice, this opposition implies a suspension, or transference, of some natural right, and in its stead is introduced an implicit or explicit promise made by some social institution. Of such suspensions and transferences, perhaps the most easily understood, and most commonly explored in modern media, is the suspension of our right to directly obtain retribution for a damage done. I would tie this natural right back to a right to preserve one's own person, and the safety of one's family, though it can also be seen as a need to rebalance as a result of the introduction of an unaddressed harm. This is a natural right, and it derives from the previous table of essential human characteristics, from rows 2 and 5 respectively. Human societies have flourished in part because they were able to suspend, or replace, this right with the power of a military apparatus. Whether in a family, an ancient island tribe, or a modern metropolis, if the threat of force, or an act of violence, is a requirement for getting even, it is most expeditious if the official corrective institution does it for you. Promising a social group to abstain from retribution, and in return obtaining the expectation that the relevant authority will address any injuries using its resources instead, is the prototypical social contract, and one most Western kids would find familiar.

We approve of fictional characters commonly encountered in mass media, who demand that "justice be done." When there is no effective official apparatus to do so, the hero always take matters into her own hands, to the audience's growing excitement and approbation. Whether it is a slave who crosses Roman law to take revenge for the killing of his child, or a freeman of the American frontier who takes matters into his own hands because the Marshal is ineffectual, revenge feels right even though we say it's wrong. The wrongness of revenge derives from the understanding made with the social institution responsible for security, an understanding that revolves around fair expectations. If the slave does not consider his relationship with society to be fairly structured, his taking revenge doesn't feel particularly wrong. If the freeman willingly hangs up his gun as part of an agreement with his countrymen, and expects others to do the same, bypassing due process tends to bring out more complex reactions. We in the audience have a threshold for such behavior, and at some point, we find ourselves in dissent. In civilized societies, after all, we teach our children that "we don't take the law into our own hands." Carefully scripted fiction can

delineate, or else thoroughly confuse on the rightness of this course of action. (Hollywood producers know very well that audiences' appetites for such conflicts has little to do with political stance or party affiliation. They will make their money all the same, as the dramatic conflict turns on universal human characteristics.)

As with other civilized societies, Americans have these same kinds of agreements -- understandings and expectations, rules and consequences, among the people and our social institutions. With the colonizing of the Western frontier, and their subsequent "civilizing" (population rise), territories became states. The accompanying transference of natural rights to the states' official institutions is a beloved topic for writers of fiction and history, as it was recent, and, in typical form, dramatic. And, as has been practiced for over four millennia in other societies and civilizations, our duties toward, and guarantees from society, are enumerated and published as our nation's laws. But America is a new nation, and its republican foundation incorporated two important new features -- ideas that seemingly first sprouted in Europe, and were historically known and even attempted, but never institutionalized at such a degree and scale.

The first of these is the idea that all political constituents are equal, and therefore share in the same rights and freedoms, by virtue of their moral agency. Initially this was phrased as equality in the eyes of God, who created us as moral equals:

"The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker [. . .] and being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us"

-- John Locke, Second Treatise of Government (1689)

The secular version of this idea is simply that all rational adults are able to recognize in one another the same relevant capacities: the ability to make rational decisions, to plan one's life, to freely will that one's actions accord with one's principles, and to understand the consequences of a breach of obligation, all in sufficiently similar measure. And because of this, we are able to respect one another as moral equals; when we see another, we recognize the presence of a key element of our own humanity -- the rational faculty that allows us to be moral and share a common ground for addressing inequity aversion. Institutionalized in the phrase "all men are created equal," this assertion of political equality serves as the basis for a political system that gives primacy to the individual. In terms of our rights, whether natural or normative, in our society it is the individual's that must be preserved first and foremost.

To this new idea of political equality was added another radical notion, at least in terms of its breadth: that the people who caucus with one another, as equals in determining the nation's laws and as subjects of their consequences, can modify their laws, and indeed the very foundational document providing their laws' coherence -- their constitution. Responsibility for any objectionable law lies with the people, who now become, as a body politic, the Sovereign. To paraphrase Thomas Hobbes, the rules to which the gamesters all agree do injustice to no one. So, barring misinformation or deceit, it is now the citizens who agree to the rules, as it is the citizens who write them. And if we do not agree, since we have the ability to change them, any flaws or limitations we perceive in our laws are our own responsibility, not any King's or President's.

The American conservative who objects to a natural right being "taken away by the government" is surely mis-speaking. Most likely, she is saying that she is experiencing an improper enforcement of the freedoms guaranteed to her -- freedoms that she obtained as a result of agreeing to give up certain natural rights -- as part of her compact with the citizenry of the nation. In other words, her complaint is most likely about

police or juridical misconduct. This isn't to say that such misconduct should be overlooked. On the contrary, it is usually our greatest immediate concern. I only mean to say that, conservatives and progressives alike have made the same promise to give up the same natural rights. Natural born citizens make this promise tacitly; I, and millions of other immigrants, made it explicitly. We are gamesters all, who have agreed to the rules expressed in our constitution, and though they may not always seem to play to our immediate benefit, if their express purpose is to address inequity across the entirety of the demos within their jurisdiction, they remain just all the same.

SECTION 2.

I consider myself a conservative politically because I find certain aspects of the state and direction of American society to be troubling in light of our natural and agreed rights. Two particular objections stand out for me, and prevent me from embracing popular ideas and activities promoted by factions within progressive wings of our democracy today. One of these is the continued acceptance and reliance on shaming as a standard part of the people's political agency. The other is a myth that seems to course through much discourse emanating from the left -- what I refer to as The Myth Of Total Equality.

What I and many concerned citizens living in liberal societies find objectionable is not so much the (freely given) loss of natural rights, but more so the harms brought to individuals and society through extrajudicial means. These are harms executed outside of the social compact, so their very existence corrupts and weakens it. They leave the citizen in a state of ambiguity: he gives up much in rights and resources, in order to secure his freedom from arbitrary harms, but suffers such harms nonetheless, and has no authority to which to appeal for redress. This describes individuals and communities living under mafia rule. It is also the state that shame leaves us in. Shaming is the schoolyard bully's weapon; he strikes when the schoolmistress isn't looking, and leaves the victim without recourse to her ability to punish the bully for the injury. And the bully is one because he, in one way or another, feels powerless himself.

So it is with social movements which engage in the practice of shaming. There is an atavistic element to such behavior, because shaming is an irrational, oppressive, and singularly uncivilized, practice: no rational citizen would freely agree to live under conditions that expose him to arbitrary extrajudicial harms without also demanding the return of his natural right to effect retribution. In many tribal societies of old, an individual's rational capacity was immaterial to the correctives his society's norms defined, and questions of fairness were merely questions of how strongly correlated it was with instability and unrest. But in ours, it is the central quality defining our political equality, and so correctives must meet a minimal threshold of being *acceptable* to rational agents. We have an easy litmus test for this, called the double standard. Shaming fails this test every time.

The more a society values social status, the more effective shaming is as a punitive and coercive tool. This is one way in which societies introduce vulnerabilities to their own stability. Even in antiquity, the status of social status itself had been elevated in the (psychologically fundamental) pursuit of belonging, allowing a corrupted form to arise and become a common, even normative pursuit in its own right. It is not status from achievement, nor from pride won and obtained by one's own conscience; it is a superficial status, changing with the times, measured by another's yardstick. The ancient Romans called it *dignitas*, and the universal importance of its pursuit, at least within their patrician class, holds one of the keys to understanding the dynamics leading to the fall of the Roman Republic.

I have mentioned a natural right that I believe arises from row 5 -- the right to be ourselves *as* the social animals that we are, or what I call the right to authenticity. For me, the measure of a society's liberality is a measure of the universality of its defense of this right. Shame directly counteracts this right. In

communities in which status and homogeneity is denormalized, shame has a weaker effect, more of a gentle coercion into the middle of the bell curve of behavior and thought. It results in little more than adjustments to commonly held, weakly valued senses of propriety. Such communities can boast of happy weirdos and eccentrics among their number. Communities that are truly liberal have so little shame that the weirdos themselves are sometimes lauded and honored. But in many contemporary first-world communities, social status has become so valued as to be a condition for economic success, which itself is often prized for its own sake. Parents begin to carefully craft a pedigree of status symbols for their children, typically in the form of highly regarded educational institutions' presence on a CV, starting as early as infancy. Once in adulthood, their children's psychological and economic well-being becomes strongly dependent on public opinion, and can be devastated with just a few carefully propagated words. Eccentrics in such communities are not happy, because the coercive power of shame has a too direct, too efficient capability of making them miserable. Rather than a gentle coercion into the middle of the bell, shame can take them out of the curve entirely, turning them into "social pariahs" overnight. This is sometimes referred to as "horizontal totalitarianism" -- horizontal, because the norms and punishments come from the people themselves, not from above by the heavy hand of social institutions. In some societies, such as those of the Australian aboriginal, being ostracized by one's community can be the equivalent of a death sentence, as inclusion into society translates directly into access to life-supporting resources. So it has been for most of humanity. In modern Western societies, exclusion through shaming does not kill a man by restricting access to physical resources like food and shelter; it kills him slowly, by taking away a critical requirement for psychological health, one that is becoming ever more threatened under the alienating conditions of high density societies of the modern world -- the sense of belonging.

For these helpless victims, whether shamed for sexual preference, aesthetic preference, preference for value hierarchies inherited from family tradition or arrived independently, or any other (harming or not, legal or not) thought or deed, there seems to be a specific path forward that is currently in vogue. If they can convince society that they do indeed belong to an accepted, effectual political group, then that political group could take measures to redefine what is shameable. In other words, a political group can create, from whole cloth, new norms -- ones that fall far from the middle of any bell curve of behavior or thought -- and in this way create two eventualities: one, the possibility of a defense through offense, shaming those that would shame them, and in this way mirroring the bully's psychology of deploying the same asymmetric power that is used against them. Two, they alter society's sense of what the shape of the bell *ought* to be, and in this way slowly make the vision a reality.

If societies change as a result of a civilizing function, resourcing function, economic function, technological function, or even a function of pure power dynamics, then we expect the curve of normalcy to change, and be changing, continuously. Food sources change, and what is considered "normal behavior" changes alongside. Suffrage is expanded, and again, what is viewed as normal changes too. But when we deploy shame in order to effect change, we almost always negatively affect the named rights of citizens who have contracted into society. We deny them the processes of justice that are their due, and deny them the equality of opportunity that is at the essence of the American social contract. Doing so constitutes an illegal oppression.

In this way, the shaming tendency shows the lie in the promise of our compact with society -- that the pursuit of happiness is equally open to all. If a group of individuals is routinely shamed, the harms suffered are a slap in the face to the constitution's protections. Note that correctives or clarifications such as gay rights require a politically effective critical mass to take root. If shame is chosen as the preferred driver for change, it becomes clear rather quickly just how difficult it is to try to shame someone for doing something that only few find objectionable. For shame to work as an effective political tool, it must be objectionable to those individuals who happen to have normative sway on a mass scale. To affect and impress such a group, a group that, depending on the time, has been associated with money, birthright, or ability to capture media and educational institutions, requires something like a movement.

This dynamic was well, though perhaps unwittingly, touched on by the writers of the television show *Transparent*. The show's central character is a man who, over the course of his life, came to terms with

feeling as though he was a woman born with a man's body. In one of the episodes' flashback sequences, he is shown as a younger man, sitting at his psychotherapist's office, expressing some of his struggles and conflicts with society's norms. The scene takes place in the early 1980's and the writers make a point of underscoring the historical gains won by gay rights movements at that time. The therapist is decidedly not a product of the 1950's, and the comfortable manner he employs when referencing gay life gives us the impression that he regards it as the most normal thing that ever was. When his patient complains about his alienation, the therapist's advice is for him to take advantage of the protective umbrella of the (now established) gay rights movement. Join in with them, and they will help you, seems to have been his message. The patient's protests -- that he's not gay, and that the movement's struggles differed from his own -- fell on deaf ears, much to the frustration of the young transgender protagonist. To me, this scene makes for a perfect condemnation of what has become of the LGBT movement. It is an ever-expanding umbrella of protections for just about anyone who feels left out, or in some way outside the norm. Like the fictional therapist, it does not offer deeper personal insights, genuine interpersonal understanding, or a path to individual or social health. (What, exactly, is there to understand about a plus sign?) It merely offers a sucker's deal: the trade of authenticity for political power.

Of the kids who grow up in environments that tend to create bullying children, only a fraction actually become bullies. That is, only a fraction of disempowered kids gain power by exercising the disempowering behavior they were subject to. What happens to the rest? Simply, they remain powerless, and often silent, victims of their injuries. Barring clear evidence to the contrary, we ought to expect something similar to occur on the larger stage of social belonging. We have seen this with Jews for so long that one is forgiven for a head-shaking reaction of despondence and resignation. Jews have suffered through centuries of prejudice and discrimination, and a fair amount of media has attended their plight by now; what about the others? The bald, short, meek, asymmetrical; the charmless and mirthless, the linguistically challenged or deeply accented; those that superficially resemble the latest villains of the nightly news; those caught in an irreconcilable conflict between authentic and socially inherited duties (some of whom are duty-bound to reject identitarianist protections); the poor in resources, and the poor in self-esteem; or, those born at times and in places where society simply does not value their considerable offerings, or what they *could* have offered, if only their potentials were appreciated and developed in a timely way. What umbrella does the LGBT movement, or any project of the American cultural left, have on offer for this portion of our citizenry?

Is it not so, too, with the American man today? He has no politically effective movement, and therefore no ability to shame others into altering society's vision of the shape of the bell curve, as regards men specifically. Would it really be inaccurate to note that notions supporting men's rights are met with knee-jerk rejection and ridicule? This is how I come to understand why the pages of the New York Times print headlines pejorating "toxic masculinity" but never "toxic femininity" in the face of an absence of a rational explanation for not doing so. "Mansplaining" is denormalized, but not "femterrupting." The ability to divert resources to male health issues, nay even speak of them as worthy of receipt of additional resources, is practically nonexistent. It has become routine for the opinions in our medical journals to cast health issues in identitarian terms, yet stark asymmetries in, for example, suicide rates across boys and girls, are not treated as boy-specific issues. There are no normative correctives for the alienation men feel as they enter, in numbers, the world of child-rearing, partly as a result of the new freedoms that their female partners have been able to enjoy in terms of their economic pursuits.

These freedoms were obtained not only through changes to society's normative expectations of family and professional roles, driven in large part by economic forces, but also by updating our laws to better reflect the actual philosophical roots of our constitution. We know these as women's rights, but they were there all along, misinterpreted and mis-enforced in a society that didn't realize that, rationally, they were already implicit and we were all beholden to them. It never made sense to say that "all men are created equal except women," just as it never made sense to say that "all are equal except those with less than 40 monthly shillings' worth of rentable property in their possession." But that is exactly how the best parts of our constitution were born -- not yet fully adapted, their potentials unrealized, like those of a newborn babe. Slavery functioned rather effectively as a regional economic subsidy in the first decades of the

federation, but the treatment of moral agents as property is similarly irrational and incompatible with our country's foundational principles and values.

What I hope we can accept is that, two hundred years ago, it didn't make political sense to be perfectly aligned with our constitution's underlying philosophy and repercussions, just as it isn't today. Indeed, no legal implementation is *ever* perfectly aligned with its underlying philosophy. (Jean-Jacques Rousseau's statement, that the ultimate goal of a liberal social contract is a state in which "each one, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself" and its ideal characterized by the "total alienation of each [. . .] to the whole community" is far from accepted by, or acceptable to, a plurality of Americans who might nonetheless refer to themselves as politically aware and in tune with their constitution's roots.)

Movements that focus on, and result in, the changing of norms, do not require shame as their coercive mechanism of change. Leaders of peaceful civil disobedience movements have shown just how powerful and effective courage can be when attempting to effect change on a mass scale. But courage itself has been redefined, its bar so lowered as to corrupt its meaning, and the power of shaming remains too facile a path to power for us to relinquish easily. In the end, when allowed and even supported in a liberal society such as ours, shaming becomes a form of deceit. As I have pointed out, we citizens expect that the security mechanism of the state will keep us safe from harm, as part of a deal in which we give up our natural right to take retribution. What happens when "credible voices" bypass due process and destroy the livelihood of innocents? The utilitarian justification -- that the harm is worth it because groups, or society itself, benefits in the end -- is unacceptable under the current American social contract. The liberal political philosophy that inhabits the Bill of Rights rejects such reasoning out of hand. Indeed, it is the guarantee of individual rights over group welfare that attracts so many immigrants like myself to becoming Americans. We have witnessed first hand how "righteous" demands of political and cultural groups can ride roughshod over individual liberties, all in the name of some better (always in aggregate, always nebulous, always speculative) future state. Besides, that's not the deal. That's not the social contract. The constitution doesn't mention anything about the injured having rights to harm innocents, "credible voices" notwithstanding. Indeed, our constitution stays true to a universal right I mentioned previously -- the citizen's right to be free of arbitrary harm. Our legal system asserts that we're innocent until proven guilty. The shaming instinct tosses such assertions out the window.

These days it seems to me that, from a political perspective, the conservative must play the role of cleanup crew for the trail of extrajudicial harms and knee-jerk correctives that the progressive's unconsidered demand -- for making it *appear* as though we are speeding forward along a civilizing path -- leaves in its wake. The progressive tends to drop old ideas for new if she feels that the new will result in a state closer to that described in Mr. Lennon's song. Contrary to how I have presented my own opinion, she believes that billions of humans living atop one another under conditions of resource scarcity and existential environmental threat can arrive at Mr. Lennon's utopian state, if only a few misguided, "toxic" individuals could be re-educated into seeing things the way she does. The conservative does no such thing; she understands the futility in treating humans as infinitely moldable, and tries to conserve what's still good in the old, which includes old promises and agreements. Today's progressive is entranced by the shiny new thing, thinking it an experiment worth pursuing if it might make for a "better world." There is little ceremony given to old ideas like carefully defining and measuring success, or staying true to, or being coherent with, one's roots. So long as things *seem* better -- or, perhaps more accurately, *feel* better for a cherry-picked few -- then that's the way to go. Subsequently, everything becomes a patch over another patch. Cohesion of thought, fealty to core principles, even principled action -- all these are just so much roadkill in the name of progress. And all along, if the actual sense of inequity across the population increases, the result is a less just, less progressed society.

Previously, I had pointed out that the rate at which humanity is being required to re-educate itself is accelerating to such a degree as to be incompatible with the tempi of human life, and in practice serves to corrupt a democracy in the way mass sedation might. I had outlined a straw man for what we could think of as a new civil right -- the right to a stable relationship with the tools we require to live life properly in the modern age. I grounded this ostensible right in a specific way: in my depiction, there is little humanity

can do to itself in order to address the harms the objectionable rate of change is introducing. It cannot change itself biologically (at least, not yet), and it can't adapt behaviorally at the required rate, so any solution would have to be restricted to changing the circumstance, which would surely introduce rather severe restrictions on the activities of the institutions forcing the rate of change upon us. This is often the necessary and right medicine, unfortunately.

But many kinds of social concerns are not unilateral problems with unilateral solutions. Indeed, if we evaluate root causes, we can come to see that many, if not most, social ills can be addressed by a combination of changes -- changes to the environment (via regulation) and changes to the individuals comprising society (via personal growth/change to values). A political intuition that only concerns itself with the former, and holds the latter in a permanent blind spot, will result in a spiraling patchwork of regulations that, taken together, exhibits concerning internal incoherence and inconsistencies.

We can see such a patchwork today. It can sometimes be discerned by an absence -- the absence of any notion, any inkling whatsoever, of change to the demos proper to be included as a basis for any political solution. This notion is strictly off limits to the contemporary progressive. In a recent interview, President Obama noted that the First Amendment does not require private companies to share all points of view, and that the origin or content of any given message can be spoofed. He refers to a solution typical of what I have come to expect from the left. Without even attempting to define anything resembling a real problem statement, the mind turns immediately to a unilateral correction: "we're going to have to find a combination of government regulations and corporate practices that address this." Address what, exactly? The population-wide paucity of original thought, or ability to perform one's own research and arrive at one's own conclusions? Or, perhaps the ease with which the demos can be duped? It has always been easily dupable (though at times the degree can seem excessive), and no amount of regulating the duper will address the ease with which the uneducated, unprepared dupee becomes one.

Regulation is a critical component of a social system such as ours, and I will touch on this more when I address economic matters in a later part of this essay. But a regulation-centric, one-sided approach to political problem solving seldom addresses root causes, and instead tends to focus only on the most obvious, or most loudly protested, symptoms. In the case of widely published but false, misleading, or unattributable information, the degree to which such practices can harm society depends in large part on society itself, and the conditions which foster vulnerability toward such practices are perennial, and were well-known to the ancients (though all people who seek power wish to create the impression of wrangling with the new). What we've known, for as long as there have been politics, is that certain beliefs and value systems can sink a tribe, or a nation.

Of human symbols most profoundly misunderstood and abused by our politicians, surely it is the taijitu, or yin/yang symbol, that leads the pack. It takes two to tango: not two political parties that result in a state of affairs barely distinguishable from one left by a single-party system, but rather, two players in the dynamic between society and its laws. Society has a major role to play in the success or failure of its social institutions, and the makeup of society, which is a reflection of the makeup of the individuals which constitute it, is changeable, particularly over generations. Each citizen's personal value system plays a role in defining the form and stability of their state. But the changes we hear being proposed these days are not changes to the individual, but changes to the corporation. It is now the corporation that is treated as a moral (and therefore, political) agent. There are simply no grounds for this that I can find. Mr. Obama continues to promote this deception, even though he was ostensibly an enemy to the Supreme Court decision that poured wood glue all over the question and awkwardly set its form. The corporation has no morality, no autonomy, no free will, and no accountability. It serves man, and its goals and behaviors are defined by man. Change the man, change the corporation.

Because social dynamics are wave-like, sometimes progressives sound remarkably old-fashioned, and conservatives sound cutting edge. It is the current climate in the United States that leads me to call myself conservative, because, today, the way I see it, key ideological positions of what is (unfortunately) referred to as "the left" look and sound an awful lot like the elevation of regressive ideas and retrograde dreaming.

The contemporary conservative is often found to misunderstand the value most dear to him -- freedom (as something attainable without its restriction). In like fashion, the modern progressive misunderstands his dearest value, equality.

As our nation expanded on its original promise of political equality, by slowly aligning its laws with its foundational principles, inequalities in *ability* to achieve the promise of the American dream rightly gained focus. If the law says opportunity must be made equal in kind and access to all with like abilities and talents, but in practice nothing of the sort is to be found in evidence, surely a rethink is indicated. Oversimplifying somewhat, we might see that there are, at a high enough level, two broad approaches one might take in addressing the results we believe fail the constitution's guarantees and require correction. One approach would be to better understand and address the reasons why opportunity does not translate into actuality. Such an approach is fraught with unpalatable and gnarly questions. For instance, the roles of a given individual's cultural background and personal preferences would need to be seriously considered and evaluated. American minorities often had, in their family history, some injury resulting from Imperialism (not necessarily American). As a result, specific cultural groups became politically off-limits to considerations for change, from without or within. (Indeed, a few of these cultures have taken on a kind of exceptional sanctity which I am hard-pressed to defend.) Another problem with addressing issues of opportunity is that it is very hard to measure successes, failures, and faulty conditions directly. As far as I can tell, there is no serious political discussion today that concerns itself with better measuring opportunity, or directing our political discussion toward an opportunity-evaluating model for progress.

The other approach, from the same, oversimplified perspective, would be for society to address outcomes directly. Outcomes seem a lot easier to measure: most would much prefer to don cop glasses in order to count the number of dark-skinned professional ballerinas on stage than to try to perform the remarkably complex calculus of evaluating the fairness involved in the opportunity for a given individual to join the ballet corps. (Cops and g-men have, apparently, a preternatural ability to count race-based outcomes, and do so with casual assuredness.) We might be tempted to refer to Soviet communists as those who tried to do something similar. In the end, though, they knew that, in order to survive and compete as a power on the world stage, let alone as a superpower, achievement must be meritocratic. You simply cannot dominate in the impressive way that the Soviets had -- in science and technology, in the fine and classical arts, in Imperialism and warfare, and in sports -- by merely providing "to each according to his needs," as the second half of the Marxist slogan puts it. "From each according to his ability" allowed individuals of talent to rise in the public's awareness, to work in elite groups, and to contribute to society's achievements. The idea, in spite of its many infamous corruptions, allowed, to a degree, for the very best to lead, rise, and lift the nation. And it introduced, at least implicitly, the notion that, if the state does not engage in maximizing everyone's potential, it does not meet the requirements of the slogan, and is likely to lose out on reaping the economic stability promised by communism's ideal implementation. Inequality in natural abilities, and therefore inequality of their cultivation and social contribution, was baked into the Soviet system. The Soviets had elites that arose not just from corruption, but also from ability. The existence of, and support for, elites translated directly into existence and support for social inequality. If someone can name a star athlete in a nation that holds celebrity in high regard, her society is fully supporting the deepest sorts of inequalities that can exist among humans.

That is why it is so important to understand what the Equality Project currently in vogue across our left-leaning political institutions is all about. We can see patterns in its proposed solutions and use of language, ones which help us to investigate and better understand its underlying ideology. On the surface, it posits the existence of a static social inequality based on a permanent hierarchy of a handful of culturally specific social categories, and attempts to address it with an equally permanent, but opposing, hierarchy of harms and benefits. Its solution is fully anti-meritocratic and requires little changing with the times. Political observers can sometimes walk away unsure about this. Perhaps I have misinterpreted the ideological position, or cast a false permanence to something intended to be a temporary corrective?

Ideology is no longer confined to placards and policy statements. We live in the age of computer technology, and the computer is more than just our teacher and guide, our taskmaster and policeman, our

hammer and plow, our inspirational friend. It is these things, as it is, in some sense, also our world. Below is a snippet of readily available source code for a typical "equity" calculation.

```
user.race == 'white' && privilege++;  
user.gender == 'male' && privilege++;  
user.cisgender === true && privilege++;  
user.transgender === false && privilege++;  
user.sexualOrientation == 'straight' && privilege++;
```

Translated into English, this code defines an unchanging, and permanent, hierarchy of oppressors and victims based on a small, static set of mutually exclusive, emic social categories. It reifies socially constructed categories and loads them with essentialist characteristics, so that they can become usable for programmatically determining questions of justice. This is computer source code, not an isolated thought in an Op-Ed. It is operational, and code like this operationalizes our largest social institutions, including those in the private sector. It redefines how a society that interacts with computer systems, that is, all of us, comes to understand equality.

Take the case of the classical symphony orchestra. For decades, American symphony orchestras have enjoyed worldwide renown for excellence, an excellence that was aided, in part, by the tradition of holding auditions behind scrims. Today, as seen through the eyes of the Equality Project, the American orchestra suffers a deep, historic deficiency, in that it is truly, and therefore problematically, color-blind: its meritocratic tradition, because it is enforced by a scrim, blinds the jury of a prospective player to everything but the music itself. Thanks to the remarkable metastasis of the project's ideology, the scrim's days now appear numbered, along with the pretense of holding purely meritocratic values in high esteem.

An immediate conclusion might be that the goal of the Equality Project is equality of role distribution across named groupings of people based on (a loose and constantly changing set of attributes associated with) social identity. This is how the actions might appear to us, at first glance. Injustices are framed as social roles unattained by named groups, rather than opportunities blocked to select citizens. Outcomes are treated, even in what we would think of as strictly positivist realms like Western Medicine, as a proxy for opportunity. This might imply that, by addressing outcomes, we will have also addressed root causes of unequal opportunity. I would not be surprised if this strikes the reader as nonsense. To some, the relationship between outcome and opportunity is rather flimsy. The proxy is weak, and does not model any causal links. To others, root causes are not even on the horizon. Recalling the source code I referenced earlier, they point out that there is no incentive to address root causes because the causes are treated as permanent fixtures, not just of American, but of all societies. We have to think deeper on this. There is something that doesn't quite make sense about outcomes in role distribution being the ultimate goal of this project, even if its stakeholders say it is so.

What state of affairs might please those who wish to "correct systems that allow for disparate outcomes among racial groups," as a common formulation would have it? We know their goal cannot be merely to change the system *per se*, as, again, the stated goal concerns outcomes, and changing the system alone doesn't necessarily change any given count. What counts are they looking to change? They cannot be economic measures, as these form the brightline differentiation between socialists (or, as Richard Rorty put it, the Old Left) and the ideology of a vocal and powerful slice of the contemporary American left promoting new notions of equality. The latter clearly and prominently rejects class-based (read: resource-based) approaches to addressing justice and inequality. Singleton reparations are single events, and are not truly grounded in (or have much effect on) questions of equality. If distribution of resources across economic classes isn't the actual issue at hand, and coarse identity-based distribution of (oddly specific) posts and positions is, why would addressing the latter result in true equality? It would, after all, still

continue to deprive these citizens of equality of *felt* experience. And without equality of that, equality of anything else -- positions, status, and even money -- will eventually be (properly) regarded as a mere shell, equality in papier mâché.

I point to an ancient observation, one that is not specific to any global hemisphere: pleasures and experiences, and especially those most valued to human societies, require a kind of impedance matching between internalities and externalities. The pleasures that are taught by artists and artisans, scientists, and spiritual teachers of calibre require a great amount of internal preparatory work to achieve, work which in turn requires a value system that, among other things, places primacy on discipline, honesty, courage, patience, humility, deference, the search for beauty and the love of knowledge. We can give a trophy to someone who doesn't deserve it. But the recipient will not obtain the experience of pleasure that a deserving champion would feel. And the field of contestants will not respect the undeserving recipient, doubling the inequality she will surely feel, and that careful shepherds of the Equality Project will notice and reject. Tell someone who grew up on a typical American food, media, and values diet that they are now suddenly a Buddhist monk. Offer them the robe. Offer them a coveted bed at the monastery. Now what?

This leaves us with a different ultimate end, one that strikes me today as the only logical end to the project: equality of pleasures, or, what Utilitarian philosophers might refer to as equality of hedons. There is no reason to believe that complaints regarding outcome distribution will just end when some desired distribution is achieved, because that achievement alone is not any real achievement at all. Since it is anti-meritocratic, it has an indirect negative effect on overall performance -- at a local and national level. And since, sooner or later, it will become evident that recipients of unearned benefits are deprived of some height of pleasure that their ostensible peers might be capable of experiencing, I expect we will see a fresh round of complaints and objections of inequality. And those complaining will be right, in their way.

If I can tell you that two people are experiencing the same pleasure from a socially relevant opportunity, but a third person is not, you would be able to say with some confidence that the situation is clearly unequal in some sense. And if I tell you that the moral core of our justice system demands equality of pleasures for a given experience, we would then be able to see that, clearly, justice is not being done in this case. Our conclusions, and the way we speak about them, would match perfectly the justifications and language employed by the Equality Project. But without that caveat, without the requirement of equality of pleasures, the mere fact of two people feeling profoundly different levels of pleasure from the same experience, achievement, role or title, doesn't have any relevance to questions of justice. And without that relevance, what justice could be achieved by staffing roles based on quotas? The typical intuitionist response is that, for some people, merely observing someone who *seems* like them makes them feel that the same is possible for them as well, particularly in light of the fact that, historically, that has not been the case. It says, hope should be equally open to those who didn't have it before. But such a response rejects equality out of hand. It requires an arbitrarily cherry-picked set of beneficiaries of justice, which it evaluates in light of the human feeling of hope. It explicitly states that citizens whose sense of self is not bound by identity, or whose identity is not nameable or acceptable, or whose lack of hope rests on non-identitarian factors such as holding out-of-norm ideas or values, must lose out on the benefits of the project, and are in this way deprived of justice.

Adventurers and heroes don't need precedents, nor do those who truly believe in what they stand for. What matters to such people are the opportunities available to them, and their own vision of what they would do with those opportunities. Pleasures or other benefits arising from their own achievements in the face of obstacles would instantly sour were they to discover that the obstacles were softened and the benefits pre-allotted, just because of a quota. I have experienced this sourness, and have heard about it from friends, some of whom were recipients of affirmative action. They didn't give up their spots; but obtaining them felt like no achievement at all.

Social inequalities arise primarily from the misalignment of the circumstances of one's birth and the social norms into which one is born. The more they are aligned, the more able is the individual to attain what is

socially favorable. When poorly aligned, the individual is born with a disfavored appearance, without the talents that society values, without the ability to build a supportive social network, without the desire to advance according to its rules, and into an environment that will act as a catalyst for the cascade of resulting harms.

To correct for the misalignment, long-term approaches must alter the makeup of society's normative curve, either by adjusting it to cover more and more traits as "normal" and "valued" (tolerance), or else by changing the people so that they align with the curve (self-modification). Attempting the latter is met with resistance, as being required to assimilate is viewed, understandably, as an affront to the virtue of authenticity. It gives the impression that one is asked to be what one is not, which is antithetic to this virtue, and strikes us as quite contradictory to any ideal of liberal democracy. To complicate matters, some traits are entirely unpalatable to society, either because they are *de facto* anti-social or so unusual and jarring as to cause instinctive revulsion. Inevitably, society cherry-picks traits for normalization, no matter how inclusive and fair it sets out to be.

In recent years, short-term approaches from the left have focused exclusively on ameliorating the symptoms of this misalignment. The leading ideology has no interest in long term correction of root causes, but instead, only attempts to address immediately perceived imbalances in outcomes. That is why, instead of working to broaden tolerance by changing what is accepted as normal by society, and devaluing normality, similarity, and propriety, it doubles down on intolerance, identifying and disparaging other inborn or cultural traits in its quest to zero out its simpleton's arithmetic of equality. Accompanying this is bigotry, in the form of intolerance of thought, or, as is referred to these days, political correctness. And, as the ideology expressly concerns itself with the most superficial of appearances, it tends to exhibit an unfortunate incontinence of sympathy. The sympathetic instinct is treated as a deciding test for justice, the degree of which is proportional to the amount of hemorrhaging our bleeding hearts are able to produce.

When approached from the short-term perspective of this most concerning project of the left, political liberality and total social equality are orthogonal goals. But we know this need not be the case, and the very framing of the problem statement creates a false dilemma. We do not need to choose the side of illiberality, as the cultural left has done. We have seen how populations can, for a time, change their value systems wholesale, even replacing a culture of violence for one of non-violence. This opens up the possibility for America to achieve its own promise of political equality -- that is, actual opportunity to pursue happiness for each and every citizen -- by way of a change to its cultural background, one that, today, emphasizes, among other things, celebrity and money as the highest values and ultimate definitions of success, destructive hyper-competitiveness as the preferred method of achieving success, knowledge as suspicious and indeterminate, shame as the means of social change, simplistic categorical essentialisms as a path to understanding others, similarity of appearance as a path to understanding oneself, and coarse, race- and gender-based outcomes as proxies for justice.

ADDENDUM

My value system, outlining moral foundations for my political stances:

(1) Virtue of Fidelity → Virtue of Authenticity

(2) Virtue of Fidelity → Respect for natural rights → Virtue of Honesty

Virtue of Honesty → Respect for agreements

Respect for agreed normative rights & duties → Respect for ideal of liberality

Respect for ideal of liberality → Respect for right to authenticity

In my value system, to be true to ourselves, and be ourselves properly, is a moral concern *directly* arising from treating things as they actually are.

Separately, under the current American social contract, the liberal philosophical underpinnings respect everyone's right to do this. Since I am an honest, naturalized citizen who refrains from cheating others, I respect that right for all citizens.