Patrick J. Deneen, "Unsustainable Libreralism" –from The Institute on Religion and Public Life, June, 2012

For most people of the West, the idea of a time and way of life after liberalism is as plausible as the idea of living on Mars. Yet liberalism is a bold political and social experiment that is far from certain to succeed. Its very apparent strengths rest upon a large number of pre-, non-, and even antiliberal institutions and resources that it has not replenished, and in recent years has actively sought to undermine. This "drawing down" on its preliberal inheritance is not contingent or accidental but in fact an inherent feature of liberalism.

Thus the liberal experiment contradicts itself, and a liberal society will inevitably become "postliberal." The postliberal condition can retain many aspects that are regarded as liberalism's triumphs—equal dignity of persons, in particular—while envisioning an alternative understanding of the human person, human community, politics, and the relationship of the cities of Man to the city of God. Envisioning a condition after liberalism calls us not to restore something that once was but to consider something that might yet be; it is a project not of nostalgia but of vision, imagination, and construction.

Many of what are considered liberalism's signal features—particularly political arrangements such as constitutionalism, the rule of law, rights and privileges of citizens, separation of powers, the free exchange of goods and services in markets, and federalism—are to be found in medieval thought. Inviolable human dignity, constitutional limits upon central power, and equality under law are part of a preliberal legacy.

The strictly political arrangements of modern constitutionalism do not per se constitute a liberal regime. Rather, liberalism is constituted by a pair of deeper anthropological assumptions that give liberal institutions a particular orientation and cast: 1) anthropological individualism and the voluntarist conception of choice, and 2) human separation from and opposition to nature. These two revolutions in the understanding of human nature and society constitute "liberalism" inasmuch as they introduce a radically new definition of "liberty."

Liberalism introduces a particular cast to its preliberal inheritance mainly by ceasing to account for the implications of choices made by individuals upon community, society, and future generations. Liberalism did not

introduce the idea of choice. It dismissed the idea that there are wrong or bad choices, and thereby rejected the accompanying social structures and institutions that were ordered to restrain the temptation toward self-centered calculation.

The first revolution, and the most basic and distinctive aspect of liberalism, is to base politics upon the idea of voluntarism—the free, unfettered, and autonomous choice of individuals. This argument was first articulated in the proto-liberal defense of monarchy by Thomas Hobbes. According to Hobbes, human beings exist by nature in a state of radical independence and autonomy. Recognizing the fragility of a condition in which life is "nasty, brutish, and short," they employ their rational self-interest to sacrifice most of their natural rights in order to secure the protection and security of a sovereign. Legitimacy is conferred by consent.

The state is created to restrain the external actions of individuals and legally restricts the potentially destructive activity of radically separate human beings. Law is a set of practical restraints upon self-interested individuals; there is no assumption of the existence of self-restraint born of mutual concern. As Hobbes writes in *Leviathan*, law is comparable to hedges that are set "not to stop travelers, but to keep them in the way"; that is, law restrains people's natural tendency to act on "impetuous desires, rashness or indiscretion," and so are always "rules authorized" as external constraints upon what is otherwise our natural liberty. "Where the law is silent," people are free, obligated only insofar as the "authorized" rules of the state are explicit. All legitimate authority is vested in the state. It is the sole creator and enforcer of positive law and even determines legitimate and illegitimate expressions of religious belief. The state is charged with the maintenance of social stability and with preventing a return to natural anarchy; in discharging these duties, it "secures" our natural rights.

Human beings are by nature, therefore, "non-relational" creatures, separate and autonomous. Liberalism thus begins a project by which the legitimacy of all human relationships—beginning with, but not limited to, political bonds—becomes increasingly subject to the criterion of whether or not they have been *chosen*, and chosen upon the basis of their service to rational self-interest.

As Hobbes' philosophical successor John Locke understood, voluntarist logic ultimately affects all relationships, including the familial. Locke—the first philosopher of liberalism—on the one hand acknowledges in his *Second Treatise on Government* that the duties of parents to raise children and the corresponding duties of children to obey springs from the commandment to "honor thy father and thy mother," but further claims that every child must ultimately subject his inheritance to the logic of consent beginning in a version of the state of nature, in which we act as autonomous choosing individuals. "For every man's children being by nature as free as himself, or any of his ancestors ever were, may, whilst they are in that freedom, choose what society they will join themselves to, what commonwealths they will put themselves under. But if they will enjoy the inheritance of their ancestors, they must take it on the same terms their ancestors had it, and submit to all the conditions annex'd to such a possession." Even those who adopt the inheritance of their parents in every regard only do so through the logic of consent, even if theirs is only tacit consent.

Even marriage, Locke holds, is finally to be understood as a contract whose conditions are temporary and subject to revision, particularly once the duties of child-rearing are completed. If this encompassing logic of choice applies to the most elemental and basic relationships of the family, then it applies all the more to the looser ties that bind people to other institutions and associations, in which continued membership is subject to constant monitoring and assessment of whether it benefits or unduly burdens any person's individual rights.

This is not to suggest that a preliberal era dismissed the idea of the free choice of individuals. Among other significant ways that preliberal Christianity contributed to an expansion of human choice was to transform the idea of marriage from an institution based upon considerations of family and property to one based upon the choice and consent of individuals united in sacramental love. What it is to suggest is that the default basis for evaluating institutions, society, affiliations, memberships, and even personal relationships becomes dominated by considerations of individual choice based upon the calculation of individual self-interest, and without broader considerations of the impact one's choices have upon the community—present and future—and of one's obligations to the created order and ultimately to God.

Liberalism began with the explicit assertion, and has continued to claim, that it merely *describes* our political, social, and private decision-making. Yet implicitly it was constituted as a constructive or normative project: What it presented as a description of human voluntarism in fact had to displace a very different form of human self-understanding and long-standing experience. In effect, liberal theory sought to educate people to think differently about themselves and their relationships. Liberalism often claims neutrality about the choices people make in liberal society; it is the defender of "Right," not of any particular conception of the "Good."

Yet it is not neutral about the basis on which people make their decisions. In the same way that courses in economics claiming merely to describe human beings as utility-maximizing individual actors in fact influence students to act more selfishly, so liberalism teaches a people to hedge commitments and adopt flexible relationships and bonds. Not only are all political and economic relationships fungible and subject to constant redefinition, but so are *all* relationships—to place, to neighborhood, to nation, to family, and to religion. Liberalism tends to encourage loose connections.

The second revolution, and the second anthropological assumption that constitutes liberalism, is less visibly political. Premodern political thought—ancient and medieval, particularly that informed by an Aristotelian understanding of natural science—understood the human creature to be part of a comprehensive natural order. Man was understood to have a *telos*, a fixed end, given by nature and unalterable. Human nature was continuous with the order of the natural world, and so humanity was required to conform both to its own nature as well as, in a broader sense, to the natural order of which human beings were a part. Human beings could freely act against their own nature and the natural order, but such actions deformed them and harmed the good of human beings and the world.
Aristotle's *Ethics* and Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* are alike efforts to delineate the limits that nature—thus, natural law—places upon human beings, and each seeks to educate man about how best to live within those limits, through the practice of virtues, in order to achieve a condition of human flourishing.

Liberal philosophy rejected this requirement of human self-limitation. It first displaced the idea of a natural order to which humanity is subject and

thereafter the very notion of human nature itself. Liberalism inaugurated a transformation in the natural and human sciences, premised on the transformation of the view of human nature and on humanity's relationship to the natural world.

The first wave of this revolution—inaugurated by early-modern thinkers dating back to the Renaissance—insisted that man should seek the mastery of nature by employing natural science and a transformed economic system supportive of such an undertaking. The second wave—developed largely by various historicist schools of thought, especially in the nineteenth century—replaced belief in the idea of a fixed human nature with a belief in human "plasticity" and capacity for moral progress and transformation. While these two iterations of liberalism—often labeled "conservative" and "progressive"—contend today for ascendance, we would do better to understand their deep interconnection.

The "proto-liberal" thinker who ushered in the "first wave" of liberalism's transformation was Francis Bacon. Like Hobbes (who was Bacon's secretary), he attacked the ancient Aristotelian and Thomistic understanding of nature and natural law alike and argued for the human capacity to "master" or "control" nature—even at one point comparing nature to a prisoner withholding secrets from an inquisitor and requiring the inquirer (the scientist) to subject it to torture—all with an aim to providing "relief of the human estate."

Liberalism became closely bound up with the embrace of this new orientation of the natural sciences and also advanced an economic system—market-based free enterprise—that similarly promoted the expansion of human use, conquest, and mastery of the natural world. Early-modern liberalism held the view that *human* nature was unchangeable—human beings were, by nature, self-interested creatures whose base impulses could be harnessed but not fundamentally altered—but could, if usefully channeled, promote an economic and scientific system that increased human freedom through the active and expanding capacity of human beings to exert their mastery over natural phenomena.

The "second wave" of this revolution began as an explicit criticism of this view of humanity. Thinkers ranging from Rousseau to Marx, from Mill to Dewey, and from Richard Rorty to contemporary "transhumanists" reject the idea that human nature is in any way fixed. Adopting the insight of first-wave theorists, they extend to human nature itself the idea that nature is subject to human conquest.

And so first-wave liberals are today represented by "conservatives" who stress the need for the scientific and economic mastery of nature but stop short of extending this project fully to human nature. They support nearly any utilitarian use of the world for economic ends but oppose most forms of biotechnological "enhancement." Second-wave liberals increasingly approve nearly any technical means of liberating man from the biological imperatives of our own bodies. Today's political debates occur largely and almost exclusively between liberals, first-wave and second-wave, neither of whom confront the fundamentally alternative understanding of human nature and the human relationship to nature that the preliberal tradition defended.

Liberalism is thus not merely a narrowly political project of constitutional government and juridical defense of rights, as it is too often portrayed. Rather, it seeks the transformation of the entirety of human life and the world. Its two revolutions—its anthropological individualism and the voluntarist conception of choice, and its insistence on the human separation from and opposition to nature—created its distinctive and new understanding of liberty as the most extensive possible expansion of the human sphere of autonomous activity in the service of the fulfillment of the self. Liberalism rejects the ancient and preliberal conception of liberty as the learned capacity of human beings to govern their base and hedonistic desires. This kind of liberty is a condition of self-governance of both city and soul, drawing closely together the individual cultivation and practice of virtue and the shared activities of self-legislation. Societies that understand liberty this way pursue the comprehensive formation and education of individuals and citizens in the art and virtue of self-rule.

Liberalism instead understands liberty as the condition in which one can act freely within the sphere that is unconstrained by positive law. Liberalism effectively remakes the world in the image of its vision of the state of nature, shaping a world in which the theory of natural human individualism becomes ever more a reality, secured through the architecture of law, politics, economics, and society. Under liberalism, human beings increasingly live in a condition of autonomy such as that first imagined by theorists of the state of nature, except that the anarchy that threatens to develop from that purportedly natural condition is controlled and suppressed through the imposition of laws and the corresponding growth of the state. With man liberated from constitutive communities (leaving only

loose connections) and nature harnessed and controlled, the constructed sphere of autonomous liberty expands seemingly without limit. Ironically, the more complete the securing of a sphere of autonomy, the more encompassing and comprehensive the state must become. Liberty, so defined, requires in the first instance liberation from all forms of associations and relationships—from the family, church, and schools to the village and neighborhood and the community broadly defined—that exerted strong control over behavior largely through informal and habituated expectations and norms.

These forms of control were largely *cultural*, not political—law was generally less extensive, and existed largely as a continuation of cultural norms, the informal expectations of behavior that were largely learned through family, church, and community. With the liberation of individuals from these associations and membership based upon individual choice, the need for impositions of positive law to regulate behavior grows. At the same time, as the authority of social norms dissipates, they are increasingly felt to be residual, arbitrary, and oppressive, motivating calls for the state to actively work toward their eradication through the rationalization of law and regulation.

Liberalism thus culminates in two ontological points: the liberated individual and the controlling state. Hobbes's *Leviathan* perfectly portrayed those two realities: The state consists solely of autonomous (and non-grouped) individuals, and the individuals are "contained" by the state. No other grouping is granted ontological reality.

In this world, gratitude to the past and obligations to the future are replaced by a near-universal pursuit of immediate gratification: Culture, rather than imparting the wisdom and experience of the past toward the end of cultivating virtues of self-restraint and civility, instead becomes synonymous with hedonic titillation, visceral crudeness, and distraction, all oriented toward promoting a culture of consumption, appetite, and detachment. As a result, seemingly self-maximizing but socially destructive behaviors begin to predominate in society.

In schools, norms of modesty, comportment, and academic honesty are replaced by widespread activities of lawlessness and cheating (along with the rise of forms of surveillance of youth), while in the fraught realm of coming-of-age, courtship norms are replaced by hookups and utilitarian sexual encounters. The norm of stable, lifelong marriage fades, replaced by various

arrangements that ensure the fundamental autonomy of the individuals, whether married or not. Children are increasingly viewed as a limitation upon individual freedom, even to the point of justifying widespread infanticide under the banner of "choice," while overall birthrates decline across the developed world. In the economic realm, get-rich-quick schemes replace investment and trusteeship. And, in our relationship to the natural world, short-term exploitation of the earth's bounty becomes our birthright, whether or not its result for our children might be shortages of life-sustaining resources such as topsoil and potable water. Restraint of any of these activities is understood to be the domain of the state's exercise of positive law and not the result of cultivated self-governance born of cultural norms and institutions.

Premised on the idea that the basic activity of life is the inescapable pursuit of what Hobbes called the "power after power that ceaseth only in death"—Alexis de Tocqueville would later describe it as "inquietude" or "restlessness"—the endless quest for fewer obstacles to self-fulfillment and greater power to actuate the ceaseless cravings of the human soul requires ever-accelerating forms of economic growth and pervasive consumption. Liberal society can barely survive the slowing of such growth and would collapse if it were to stop or reverse for an extended period of time. The sole object and justification of this indifference to human ends—of the emphasis on "Right" over the "Good"—is nevertheless premised on the embrace of the liberal human as a self-fashioning individual and self-expressive consumer. This default aspiration requires that no truly hard choices be made between lifestyle options.

Liberalism's founders tended to take for granted the persistence of social norms, even as they sought to liberate individuals from those constitutive associations and the accompanying education in self-limitation that sustained these norms. In its earliest moments, the health and continuity of good families, schools, and communities was assumed, though their bases were philosophically undermined. The philosophical undermining led to the undermining of these goods in reality, as the norm-shaping authoritative institutions become tenuous with liberalism's advance. In its advanced stage, the passive depletion has become active destruction: Remnants of associations historically charged with the cultivation of norms are increasingly seen as obstacles to autonomous liberty, and the apparatus of the state is directed toward the task of liberating individuals from any such bonds.

In a similar way—in the material and economic realm—liberalism has drawn down on age-old reservoirs of resources in its endeavor to conquer nature. An extended inability to provide for seemingly endless choice would result in a systemic crisis, requiring the state to face down a populace suddenly confronted with the one unacceptable "choice" of restricted choices. Liberalism can function only by the constant *increase*of available and consumable material goods and satisfactions, and thus by constantly expanding humanity's conquest and mastery of nature. No matter the political program of today's leaders, *more* is the incontestable program. No person can aspire to a position of political leadership through a call for limits and self-command.

Liberalism was a wager of titanic proportions, a wager that ancient norms of behavior could be abolished in the name of a new form of liberation and that the conquest of nature would supply the fuel that would permit near-infinite choices. The twin outcomes of this effort, the depletion of moral self-command and the depletion of material resources, make inevitable an inquiry into what comes after liberalism.

Liberalism's defenders fear that any compromise of liberal principles will result in the resurgence of religious warfare, the re-enslavement of various populations, the loss of the independence of women, and the abandonment of rights and equality under law. If I am right, however, a reconsideration of liberalism's two main commitments will not compromise but instead be the preconditions for securing equal human dignity and ordered liberty. The conception of inviolable human dignity, of constitutional limits upon central power, of equality under law, and of the free exchange of goods and services in markets is, again, part of a preliberal legacy.

The creation of a world after liberalism would not require, as some might fear, the dismantling of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, nor the cessation of free markets. Instead, what would be required is a fundamental rethinking of how law and economics are understood and employed to undergird the liberal vision of society. Such a rethinking is by necessity taking place, in many ways. As government is able to provide fewer and fewer services to people facing challenging times (the claims of the political left notwithstanding), people will necessarily turn to the very constitutive relationships that liberalism regarded as limitations upon our autonomy: family, neighborhood, and community. Breakdowns in the market similarly call for strengthening such institutions. The economic crisis has, for example, resulted in greater understanding of the need to rely upon the help

of families and communities, as shown in the growth of multigenerational homes, which were the norm for much of human history.

Contemporary "conservatism" does not offer an answer to liberalism, because it is itself a species of liberalism. While the elders on the political right continue to rail against "environmentalists," they fail to detect how deeply conservative (conservationist) is the impulse among the young who see clearly the limits of the consumptive economy and the ravages it bequeaths to their generation. What these elders have generally lacked is a recognition that one cannot revise one of liberalism's main commitments, today characterized as "progressivism," while ignoring the other, particularly economic liberalism. A different paradigm is needed, one that intimately connects the cultivation of self-limitation and self-governance among constitutive associations and communities with a general ethic of thrift, frugality, saving, hard work, stewardship, and care. So long as the dominant narrative of individual choice aimed at the satisfaction of appetite and consumption dominates in the personal or economic realms, the ethic of liberalism will continue to dominate our society.

Both the left and the right effectively enact a pincer movement in which local associations and groups are engulfed by an expanding state and by the market, each moving toward singularity in each realm: one state and one market. If the left insists on the liberal interpretation of our constitutional and political institutions in an uncompromising effort to defend the ever-expanding role of the state to secure the practical liberty of individuals, the right defends the free-market system and uncompromisingly rejects any restraint on the unfettered economic choices of individuals. The right embraces a market orthodoxy that places the choosing, autonomous individual at the center of its economic theory and accepts the larger liberal frame in which the only alternative to this free-market, individualist orthodoxy is statism and collectivism. It seeks to promote family values but denies that the market undermines many of the values that undergird family life. The left commends sexual liberation as the best avenue to achieve individual autonomy, while nonsensically condemning the immorality of a marketplace in which sex is the best sales pitch. The encompassing Leviathan daily attains more reality.

A different trajectory does not require a change of institutions; it requires a change in how we understand the human person in relationship to other persons, to nature, and the source of creation. While the Constitution consolidated a number of political activities in the center, it left considerable

room for local entities. The return to a more robust form of federalism would allow for greater local autonomy in establishing and cultivating local forms of culture and self-governance.

This will provide space for the nuanced discussions between what sociologist Robert Nisbet called the "laissez-faire of social groups." Recommending federalism always meets the response that local self-rule and culture will reinstitute local prejudices. That argument is a strained effort not to defend the great and I think irreversible achievement of Christendom's embrace of the imago Dei, but instead to defend the state's intervention in every sphere of life, justified on the grounds that local norms and prohibitions express bigotry and lead directly to oppression.
A wide variety of local norms and beliefs should be permitted, within limits that would exclude egregious limits upon human liberty. These authoritative norm-shaping institutions and behaviors are the only credible mechanisms for advancing the substantial withering away of the state. These local norms and beliefs would afford a different experience of liberty, one about which liberalism has been silent, one that stresses self-governance and self-limitation achieved primarily through the cultivation of practices and virtues. Such a cultivation of ordered liberty would restrain the pursuit of libertine liberty, and restrain the tendency toward the expansion of state and market, which together increasingly undermine constitutive social institutions, thereby leaving the individual "free" to be shaped by popular culture and advertising mostly aimed to encourage the appetites fed by the enticements of a globalized market.

The recognition of the central and constitutive role and the necessity of the varied institutions that exist between the state and the individual has been a staple observation of thinkers from Tocqueville to contemporary thinkers on both the nominal right and nominal left, such as Bertrand de Jouvenel, Robert Nisbet, Russell Kirk, Christopher Lasch, Alasdair MacIntyre, Wilson Carey McWilliams, and Jean Bethke Elshtain. As they have argued, family, citizenship, church, neighborhood, community, schools, and markets need to be drawn closer together in a more integrated whole, in every aspect ranging from the built environment to the cultivation of genuine local cultures arising from the varying circumstances of diverse places. Drawing them together requires an ethic of self-command. So long as the right tries to defend them without offering a broader ecology of a deeply integrated and

formative community—something broader, for example, than the long-standing defense of "family values" that denigrates the idea that there is a relationship between the family and the village—it can offer no real alternative to liberalism.

If I am right that the liberal project is ultimately self-contradictory, culminating in the twin depletions of moral and material reservoirs upon which it has relied even without replenishing them, then we face a choice. We can pursue more local forms of self-government by choice or suffer by default an oscillation between growing anarchy and likely martial imposition of order by an increasingly desperate state.

If my analysis is fundamentally accurate, liberalism's endgame is unsustainable in every respect: It cannot perpetually enforce order upon a collection of autonomous individuals increasingly shorn of constitutive social norms, nor can it continually provide endless material growth in a world of limits. We can either elect a future of self-limitation born of the practice and experience of self-governance in local communities, or we can back slowly but inexorably into a future in which extreme license invites extreme oppression.

The ancient claim that man is by nature a political animal and must in and through the exercise and practice of virtue learned in communities achieve a form of local and communal self-limitation—a condition properly understood as liberty—cannot be denied forever without cost. Currently we lament and attempt to treat the numerous social, economic, and political symptoms of liberalism's idea of liberty but not the deeper sources of those symptoms deriving from the underlying pathology of liberalism's philosophic commitments.

While most commentators today regard our current crises—whether understood morally or economically or, as they are rarely understood, as both moral and economic—as technical problems to be solved by better policy, our most thoughtful citizens must consider whether these crises are the foreshocks of a more systemic quake that awaits us. Unlike the ancient Romans, confident in their eternal city, who could not imagine a condition "after Rome," we should ponder the prospect that a better way awaits after liberalism.

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Mahoney and Paul J. Griffiths were given at a FIRST THINGS symposium titled "After Liberalism" and were prepared and published with the support of the Simon/Hertog Fund for Policy Analysis and of Fieldstead and Company.