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Why Liberals and Conservatives Will Never, Ever Agree

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In this, his eleventh book, Canadian scholar and former Olympic athlete William D. Gairdner takes on modern liberalism (or progressivism) and political correctness, the seemingly ever-waxing powers in Western society. Progressivism’s fairly rapid ascendancy in western society – really only since the 1950’s – has led to significant changes in both the U.S. and Canada (the two nations on which Gairdner mainly focuses). Human rights tribunals continue to police speech in Canada while self-appointed watchdogs of political correctness shut down debates at U.S. and Canadian universities. The divisions in society are deep and at times hostile.

But Gairdner believes conservatives and liberals talk past one another, when they talk to each other at all. He hopes his book will encourage deeper debate. It is written “for people living in a society in which they can’t seem to defend their deeply held opinions on serious moral and political issues without stirring up a lot of scorn and outrage – people who would rather skip the emotion, dig a little deeper, and understand better the underlying differences between the liberal and conservative worldviews that seem increasingly to be separating citizens from each other” (xi). Sadly, it is hard to imagine many modern liberals getting through much of this book. Some US colleges are now providing “trigger warnings” for students. At a Brown University speakers’ event, students could retreat to a room with coloring books, bubbles and Play-Doh if the debate became too difficult for them to bear. Since Gairdner’s book criticizes same-sex marriage, divorce rates, and euthanasia it would require its own companion booklet of trigger warnings for such tenderhearted souls. But for conservatives, especially of a Burkean slant, there will be much they will appreciate in this far ranging book of ideas.

The book divides into four parts: Part 1 provides background on the liberal and conservative viewpoints; Part 2 describes “the forces at work”; Part 3, the longest section of the book, containing nine chapters, examines in greater detail key “themes that divide.” This includes an important chapter on human nature; Part 4 concludes with an examination of three key divisive issues: homosexuality and gay marriage, abortion, and euthanasia.

By tracing North American liberalism’s modifications and descent through four stages, the second chapter sketches a narrative for the rest of the book. Early (Puritan) liberalism put virtue firmly at the center of concern: it meant having the freedom to do what one ought. “By the eighteenth century,” however, “all over Europe (but especially in the New World) the virtue motive was slowly being displaced by the individual freedom and property rights motive, a shift that was fueled mostly by the growing influence of what we today call the classical liberal political philosophy of John Locke… This Lockean menu, which exalted private reason and will above normative law, was the basis of the American Declaration of Independence…which was
a revolution in favour of radical liberty” (18-19). “Fortunately,” both the U.S. Constitution (1787) plus the mostly intact religion and mores of early America restrained Lockean “radical liberty,” at least for a while. According to Gairdner’s account, then, the U.S. Constitution does not build on the Declaration’s principles; it puts brakes on its excesses. Those familiar with Harry Jaffa’s interpretation might object that it was the Constitution’s compromises with slavery that needed to be brought into line with the moral Declaration via the Civil War. And in Abraham Lincoln’s view, the Declaration is the “father of all moral principle” in the American regime. The difference depends on how one reads the Lockean elements of the Declaration.

Gairdner gives the impression that Lockean natural rights provide a poor beginning saved only by a more conservative constitution. Should true conservatives abandon Locke? Scholars such as Thomas G. West, R.J. Pestritto, and Charles Kesler argue that this is to underestimate the Lockean foundations of constitutional government, which are more in line with moral natural law than the later developments ushered in the wake of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In Canada, scholars such as Janet Ajzenstat and Brian Lee Crowley have gone back to our neglected primary documents and resuscitated the Lockean elements of Canada’s early constitution, revealing the extent to which the early Canadians favored rational liberty and individual responsibility rather than a coddling administrative state. For them, a return to a proper understanding of Locke is needed, especially to bolster the role of legislatures instead of executive decision-making (either as executive orders from the President or directives from the Prime Minister’s Office controlling what MP’s can or cannot say in the House of Commons). It is surprising that Ajzenstat’s scholarship in particular is not mentioned by Gairdner since he worked with her and others to edit and publish a much needed and important collection of Canada’s founding debates.

Nevertheless, Stage 2 Liberalism was unsteady. The “liberty for all” under the rule of law did not result in the “perfect society of which those first liberals had been dreaming” (20). It was imperfect because it generated inequalities. By “first liberals” does Gairdner now mean Rousseau, Condorcet and Voltaire rather than Locke (or James Madison)? Madison, for example, writes, “From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results.” “The protection of these faculties is the first object of government” (Federalist 10, emphasis added). Thomas D’Arcy McGee, a Father of Confederation, praised 1865 Canada where broad freedom meant men of talent, the natural aristoi, could rise by merit to their proper station. Be that as it may, according to Gairdner, social and economic inequalities marred the vision of perfection that at least some liberals had in mind. At the same time huge increases in productivity and wealth would lead to large tax harvests. New social programs could be funded that would be aimed at producing more equality. “For the first time in history a quasi-official argument of state was being developed to the effect that economic and social equality are preconditions for liberty” (21).

Stage 3 liberalism therefore replaces liberty with equality, and along with this occurs “a slow shift in the allocation of responsibility for one’s condition in lie from self to others (the system)” (20). Equality would need to be imposed through laws and by increasing the size and scope of
the state, yet liberals wished to maintain some connection to the liberty for individuals associated with Stage 2. How was this contradiction overcome? By mutating into something Gairdner calls "libertarian socialism." Individuals were given freedom to do what they wished with respect to sexual and bodily freedom in exchange for giving up control to the government over almost every other area of their lives.

Finally, Stage 4 liberalism ushers in the “triumph of the will over nature.” Here fascism and National Socialism represent the extreme forms, but our current libertarian socialism is merely a milder form of the same thing. “Orwell got it wrong and Huxley got it right: The ‘free’ democratic masses would not be stupefied and regulated by totalitarian oppressors. Instead, they would surrender their most important political and economic freedoms to the state and the regulation this necessitates without a fight, in exchange for the right to pacify themselves with their own private bodily freedoms and pleasures” (25).

The most fundamental difference Gairdner explores between conservatives and liberals, and to my mind the one that entails the others, is how each side understands nature and human nature. Conservatives believe human nature “is fixed and law-like in its basic parameters” (69) though “it is true that culture and socialization may add to or subtract from our human endowment to a significant degree” (70). We are imperfect, but we bear the responsibility for making choices that lead to different outcomes. For the modern liberal, on the other hand, people are by nature good, but they are corrupted by society. Human nature is not a constant; it is malleable. Therefore, to improve outcomes for individuals, one needs to change society, removing all its imperfections and distortions. Liberals are also more often committed to a materialist explanation of the universe, so they deny natural law – all there is is human law. “The subtext is that secular humanist worship will continue to mean the worship of human progress and will. The conservative view has always been that human beings do better, and do less damage to others, by worshipping a transcendent God and living under a higher moral law they cannot change, than by worshipping themselves and living under a changeable human law that is vulnerable to the will of those who would manipulate them” (188). The liberal position is historicist, since according to it the past is not a guide to the future except to remind us of how bad things were. Progress means making flawed society into utopia. Hence liberals are aggressive when it comes to pushing big social and cultural changes. Also, if “nature” is historical rather than permanent, then it is nonsense to speak of natural rights. Individuals need to be formed by society, preferably the right society run by enlightened experts. This is the political conclusion the progressives draw from Darwin and non-teleological science. And progressives, like John Dewey, knew that controlling public school curricula would have a tremendous impact on just what sort of individuals were formed. Gairdner quotes the progressive John Dunphy: “I am convinced that the battle for humankind’s future must be waged and won in the public school classroom by teachers who correctly perceive their role as proselytizers of a new faith: a religion of humanity…” (181).

But if, by contrast, nature provides a permanent foundation for establishing moral claims, then one can perhaps begin to argue, as Gairdner does later in the book, that, for example, same sex marriages are contrary to nature’s intentions. But this natural law argument, based as it is
on a basic human nature shared by everyone, seems to run counter to the Burkean notion he elsewhere endorses that what is “right” emerges historically through the unique development and unique history of a given group of people.

Gairdner decries modern society’s over-commercialization. He is not a fan of the sort of conservatism that extols the virtues of the free market and little else. Again, he prefers Burke to Locke or Hayek. But will Burke’s “three P’s” – prejudice, prescription, and presumption – provide an adequate response to Heideggerean existentialism and postmodernism? Summarizing Heidegger’s position, the American political theorist Thomas Pangle writes, “The genuinely venerable in human life – that around which all else in human existence orbits – consist of virtues, gods, things of beauty, communal obligations, and model individuals and ways of life that are the radically diverse manifestations of an elusive, because utterly temporal or historical, Being” (Ennobling Democracy, 35). And in Natural Right and History, Leo Strauss maintains that Burke’s thought is also a form of historicism since it presumes that what is given to a people by history is both reasonable and particular to them. Call it an organic community if you wish, but it might still amount to turning history into a principle of right. So it is questionable at least whether or not we get much past the historicism of the progressives by embracing Burke.

Modern secular humanism, Gairdner argues, tears down traditions and looks to set society on “rational foundations.” Referring now to Hume and to Burke (147), Gairdner looks instead to “pre-rational certainties” as the source of our morality and to the organic ties that bind a community together. “Morality without thinking? The mere thought of that horrifies the liberal moralist, just as the pure liberal ideal – the notion that every man is the legislator of his own morality – horrifies the conservative” (149). But surely the pre-rational certainties of one civilization clash with if not contradict the “certainties” of other civilizations. It is this clash that stimulates political philosophy to raise these certainties to consciousness and to ask for their ultimate justification. It may indeed always be the case that for the vast majority of people the foundations of their civic, political and moral lives will always rest on pre-rational certainties. But when these pre-rational certainties have been thrown into doubt, as Gairdner has shown they have been, is it sufficient simply to recover them or doggedly to stick to the ones that remain? Gairdner does not seem satisfied with such a response since his book initiates a philosophical examination of the rational grounds of healthy social life – particularly in those chapters on “On Human Nature” (chapter 6) and “On God and Religion” (chapter 13). There, to his credit, he begins to recover some of the arguments that support the otherwise “pre-rational certainties” lying at the heart of our society and regime.

There are technical drawbacks to the book: it lacks citations, scholarly footnotes, and it does not include a bibliography, making it difficult and sometimes impossible to follow up on some material Gairdner quotes. In addition, I found the “Where do you stand” summary charts appended to each chapter a bit tedious; they reminded me too much of the sort of pop-psych personality tests one finds in grocery-store magazines (“What’s your kitchen temperament?”).
That said, I found myself resorting to a similar list in class to illustrate ideological differences among the Canadian federal parties. A student blurted out: “You mean I’ve been voting for the wrong party this whole time?” Obviously lists are helpful for some people.

The book does not conclude with specific policy prescriptions; however, in so far as the progressives have virtually taken over the places of higher education, including and especially the faculties of education where they train the public school teachers, they have been able to proselytize unopposed. Students are pretty much guaranteed to be taught only one side of each of the table of ideas Gairdner presents at the end of each chapter. One wonders if this helps to explain why modern liberalism has so quickly gained ground since the 1950’s. It is a method guaranteed to produce those liberals William F. Buckley lamented: those who say all sides should be listened to but who would be shocked and disappointed to discover that for many contemporary issues there is another side. But Gairdner’s book will help, by clearly and patiently laying out to those who read it the reasonableness of the conservative side of the argument. It would be great if more young people would read the book and be compelled to consider these alternative arguments. Yet the influence of modern liberalism is powerful enough on today’s campuses that any university professor brave enough to assign this book would be well advised to have plenty of bubbles and Play-Doh for the students – and tenure.