

Sleeping on a Volcano

by Christopher DeGroot (December 2017)



Study for a Portrait, Francis Bacon, 1971

“We are sleeping on a volcano . . . [a] storm is on the horizon.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville

On November 1, 1771, in a letter to the Stewards of the Bell Club, the great moral psychologist Edmund Burke [declared that](#)

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own

appetites; in proportion as their love to justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption; in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.

This brings us to one of the worst elements of the Left: its assertion of desires ("rights") in a manner that shows no "disposition to put moral chains upon . . . [its] own appetites." There is, moreover, much "vanity and presumption," yet no "soundness and sobriety of understanding" in its habit of deeming others villains just because they don't agree with you, even as you yourself cannot be bothered to make a coherent argument that springs from the actual context in which the thorny subject is rooted. As for "the counsels of the wise and good," how many people in this country today even believe in this *traditional respect for deserved authority*? Very few, it seems, because unless a rigorous system of ennobling duty is *imposed* on us from an external source at an early age, most human beings will spend their lives following their delusive inconstant feelings, the source of their generally superficial opinions about how things should be for everyone. So that they never learn what legitimate authority is, and for them lives of chaos and confusion are inevitable.

Most Americans today seem not to know what to do with those lofty concepts, democracy and liberty. In their conduct, these prove to be so much delusion and error. It is no wonder. The human being is *essentially* impulsive, naturally subject to all

sorts of thoughts and desires that, more often than not, he does not choose but merely notices within the stream of thought. "The data of consciousness," Freud remarked in [*The Unconscious*](#) (1915), "have a very large number of gaps in them . . . Our most personal daily experience acquaints us with ideas that come into our head, we know not from where, and with intellectual conclusions arrived at, we do not know how." We are like a house teeming with uninvited guests who must somehow all get along. Disciplined attention to the inner life is needed to direct the self; otherwise our conduct is bound to be foolish much of the time and find us in frequent conflict with others. Most important is the steadying moral will, the daily practice of the virtues (individual responsibility, honesty, fairness, temperance, restraint, charity, courage) that we must learn from those who came before us. For such habit is, in William James' words, "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance." By practicing good habits, we may eventually develop a good disposition, that is, a mature moral will. This is now a rarity, and so our culture is in a very bad way.

It is necessary to try to understand the past, as well as *yield to its authority*, at least to some degree. To assume an inheritance is an act of submission, even as the self is augmented thereby. This rich burden the Foucauldian Left—which positively detests the element of submission, in part because it does not understand the augmentation—distrusts and resents by definition, since for the Foucaultist there is no legitimate authority, and all moral coercion (save its unarguable own) is evil. Now to be sure, in practice authority tends to be mixed at best, and coercion *is* often evil; yet I would submit, nevertheless, that the Leftist who resists all authority (but his own) and all the inherited coercive mores of his culture shall be left with no morality save what he and his particular tribe care to acknowledge. How then deal with

the rest of mankind? Though there may be no serious consequences in fantastic, comfortable academia, there will certainly be terrible ones in politics, and in human affairs generally. Nor is it unjust to view Foucault's own early death from AIDS, the result of promiscuous homosexuality, as an example of the folly of letting your own self be your sole guide in how to live.

No one should have any doubt about the human need for authoritative wisdom. Without it, there's only the neverending chaos of individual assertion. But there is a daunting problem here, one that has to do with the nature of our democracy at this moment. The just belief that we should all be equal before the law has been transformed, via the usual well-meaning but thoughtless sentimentalism, into the belief that all people and all cultures are equal in some vague ultimate sense. (This popular sentiment, like the welfare state, is basically a displaced Christianity.) Thus, excepting parents in regard to their children, nobody has a right to tell anyone how to live. Now I am well-aware that through the ages man has not been particularly adept at governing his fellow man, a failing that comprehends the essential value of democracy, in which people endeavor, through argument and debate, to reach agreement concerning how they should live together. Yet our democratic experiment is not working. Life has become an affair of individual fulfillment in which desire, feeling and entitlement have largely supplanted reason, culture and wisdom. It is not a good thing that, being liberated from traditional constraints, we are now left with little besides individual assertion. Now the only universally recognized "controlling power upon will and appetite" is external—that is, the law. Nor will that avail. Increasingly distant from its religious origin, the law, despite the growing cultural tendency toward statism, cannot make a moral agent of man. Moreover, given the lack of moral order from "within," for many it has become merely rational and prudent to aim not so

much at not doing wrong as at not being found culpable. You may say here that many have too much integrity to live so. I would strongly agree. But I would add that there are also many who are not so moral (whose number is likely to increase over time, as it has long been doing). And if I had to wager on the conduct of a person who answers only to himself (with his clever ability to evade and deceive the authority of the law, not to mention his own conscience, assuming he has one), or on one who believes he is answerable to an authority whom he *cannot* evade and deceive, I should take the *earnest, fearful* believer every time.

What best preserves liberty is a certain spirit of illiberality, functioning to keep a people united as they collectively incline to shun (and shame) certain behaviors, an activity without which the moral life must be inadequate at best. For many of us the that life now means paying lip service to whatever we believe is expected of us in the way of morality, as we understand it from our dealings with others, who are mostly spineless conformists. In other words, our morality is largely a farce supported by cant.

Conscience devoid of religion only goes so far, we now learn. The Left, in particular, is thick with false piety, with mere academic herd ideology, yet thin on real moral principle. The ordinary citizen more and more displays the characteristically modern sensibility long ago deplored by Jacob Burckhardt: "the total egoism of today's private person who wants to exist as an individual and asks of the community only the greatest possible security for himself and his property, for which he pays his taxes amid sighs, and who also likes to attach himself to the community in a specific sense as an 'official.'" "

Where peoples used to be bound by tradition and certain

concomitant virtues, they are now divided by "rights." Lacking the moral-psychological disposition by which man arrived at democracy, Western democracies are destroying themselves from within. Each person a nation of one, a bundle of "rights" within a vast general incoherence: this effectively is our present condition, facilitated by the new technology that, serving as an echo chamber of our own opinions, functions more to reinforce our divisions than to dispel them. Here, Leftists and Liberals are like a man who, though he has terminal cancer, thinks the disease can be cured by passing certain laws and policies, which, of course, we all "deserve." The legislative "solution" amounts to a dubious effort to preserve Christianity: Universalist goods but without their theological justification and the affective virtues by which those goods came into being and were preserved. Note that for John Dewey, an evangelist in his youth, democracy was to be a "living faith" of universal validity. That is a very common delusion these days. One recognizes a similarity here with our many false conservatives: Bill Kristol, Jonah Goldberg, John Podhoretz, and all the rest. Like naïve liberals, these shallow minds—effectively handmaidens of the lobbyists—all take it for granted that democracy is the best form of government, for Iraq as for the US: so that America's foreign policy is to be so much nation-building. Well, it's not *their* children who shall die.

If it is to be more than just a pragmatic tool, if it is to compel the individual will and bind it with others, liberty needs a justification beyond the law. That justification will invariably concern our moral nature, because there is no government that does not, in some measure, take into account man's moral needs. Our moral nature does its work in the form of vital beliefs, practices, customs: the abstract mind grounded by a common, organic, affective moral will. In a word, by faith. By what we believe to be metaphysical justification that comprehends our most significant ends. Otherwise we must (even if only unconsciously) deal with

historicism and relativism and may face an infinite regress in our search for what we collectively—or rather, alas, the venal majority—believe to be justification. Nor is it an easy thing to reach agreement, especially insofar as a nation is numerous, or “diverse.” Besides, what pleases the philosopher in his study, working up clever arguments, and making ever finer distinctions and hair-splitting objections, all so absorbing to his genius that few others can understand, does not even matter to most of the citizenry, which consists of infinitely suffering burdened animals who all hope, at some time or other, that, as John Keats said in his last letter, “we cannot be created for this sort of suffering.”

The challenge for our increasingly faithless time is that liberal morality, fundamentally prohibitive, only goes so far. By itself, the law does not compel the recalcitrant human will, let alone unite it with others. The law’s justification is a weak thing in regard to human psychology. Having (for good reasons) separated Church from State, we now struggle to live well amid that division. We are lost without metaphysics. More progress, more suffering, might be our motto. For liberal morality says in the main “thou shalt not.” Its “duties” are essentially negative. But having no right to harm your neighbor does not do nearly as much for frail and egotistical mankind as *prescriptive* morality, which tries to get rid of the very *inclination* to harm him, by commanding you to love him. How very far, then, we now find ourselves from what the national character used to be, especially in its origin. My friend David Goldman, in his wide-ranging essay “[public violence](#),” the loss of civility, courtesy, and decency—all reflect “inward degeneration.” It is an ugly sight, like Medusa looking in the mirror. The citizenry, more and more factional and rancorous, now demands President Trump’s impeachment without a justification, now calls for his assassination. Our parties hate each other, and display tremendous fervor in that hatred. Underneath the constant

indignant rhetoric, there seems a longing to do evil *en masse*, though as so often in history, in the name of what is good and just. This abundant energy that wants to burst forth, we must hope, shall be applied in the right direction. For it may well be that we need [excessive individualism](#), learning as a result something of the spirit of compromise and solidarity our grandfathers knew. Certainly, overcoming corruption is not a simple, rational thing like removing a stain from a garment.

And there is quite a lot to overcome, most of all, the disposition of the human will itself. “Liberated” from the traditional religious mores and customs that formerly shaped and checked it, the will now refuses to compromise, and so threatens to destroy the state itself and civilization itself. Most people who have an interest in the matter equate the modern world’s democratic turn with supreme progress. And yet, no great philosopher ever had much faith in democracy, and it may not be long before historians are compelled to view our time as having presaged a period of destructiveness even worse than the unprecedented horrors of the last century. It may well be that modern democracy is coming to an end, and that human societies in the not so distant future will rise anew in a natural, traditional, hierarchical manner.

For now, America is exceedingly restless and fraught, like Europe before its great world wars. We are, as de Tocqueville once wrote, “sleeping on a volcano.” Our future looks dark, and it cannot be anything but that unless we acknowledge the failure of individual agency that is at the bottom of our many problems, although obscured by the endless lies and errors which function to make sources outside ourselves the culprit: the government, the corporations, white privilege, the patriarchy, the school-to-prison pipeline—anyone and anything but ourselves.

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