

Liberalism as a Way of Life

ALEXANDRE LEFEBVRE

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Optimist: “This is the best of all possible worlds.”

Pessimist: “Yes, I know.”

—JOHN RAWLS, HANDWRITTEN JOKE
ON THE TITLE PAGE OF HIS PERSONAL
COPY OF A *THEORY OF JUSTICE*

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Introduction

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR VALUES FROM?

I'LL NEVER FORGET my first Christmas in Australia. I moved to Sydney in 2010 with my wife and our newborn daughter, but for the first several years we took regular trips back to Canada to spend the holidays with family. In 2016, though, we stayed put. On Christmas Day we did the usual things—a long breakfast and the opening of gifts—and then planned to head down to our local beach for a welcome novelty: Christmas in full summer. We slapped on sunscreen, grabbed our boogie boards and thongs (an Aussie word I still can't get used to; it means flip-flops), and off we went.

I am not a religious man, and even so I still wasn't prepared for what greeted us. The beach and surrounding area were packed with thousands and thousands of partyers. It was beer, bikinis, Santa hats, and tattooed flesh as far as the eye could see. As I said, I'm not religious, nor I should add prudish, but the thought that came to mind was that this must have been how people from the Middle Ages imagined the fun parts of hell. As if from the brush of Hieronymus Bosch, it was a picture of antisoLEMnity.

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In the spirit of “when in Rome” we stayed and enjoyed ourselves. Everyone was in a great mood, there was plenty of good food and even more bad singing (drunken carols and all), and if you paddled out in the ocean about twenty meters, you could survey the spectacle from a quiet distance. We returned home later that afternoon wondering how our folks back in Vancouver would spend their assuredly cold, drizzly day.

The next morning there was a price to pay. Christmas Day had been literally as well as figuratively trashy. Revelers had left behind sixteen tons of garbage. There was so much that the *New York Times* even reported on it a few days later (go ahead and google “coogee christmas nyt”). As you might expect in our digital age, word quickly got around, and my wife, daughter, and I returned to the scene of the crime to help the community cleanup. Makeshift dump piles were arranged, consisting mostly of food containers, plastic bags, bottles and cans, and also lost or abandoned footwear, clothing, and the aforementioned Santa hats. The mood was a mix of conviviality among the volunteers (most of whom had celebrated on the beach the day before) and low-key grumbling about who was responsible for the mess. A week later, everything was clean and tidy as if it nothing had happened. But ask any local and they’ll remember Christmas 2016, if only because its lasting outcome was an alcohol ban at the beach.

Why begin with this story? Those few days had the truth of caricature, with the good, bad, and ugly of my world on exaggerated display: its friendliness, playful irreverence, antisnobishness, tolerance, and can-do pragmatism, along with its irresponsibility, wastefulness, and potential moral and spiritual emptiness. And it led me to wonder, What kind of society acts like this?

My question may sound judgmental, as if I am issuing a condemnation. “Who acts like this? Barbarous Aussies, that’s who!”

That is not my intention. For starters, stick a lovely beach and gorgeous weather in any major Western city in the Northern Hemisphere, and I doubt Christmas Day would play out much differently. More to the point, my question is sincere. Christmas Day 2016 confused me and raised two related issues.

First, I was curious about the values and behaviors on display. Maybe the mishmash I listed above—friendliness and irresponsibility, tolerance and emptiness, pragmatism and wastefulness, freedom and regulation—wasn't a mishmash at all. Maybe it was a coherent package of how people, myself included, navigate the world, however distorted and exaggerated on this occasion. Second, I wanted to know where that package came from. Values and behaviors do not fall from the sky. They are formed and sustained within historical traditions, institutional frameworks, and systems of meaning. The big question raised by Christmas Day 2016 was thus, Where did we, where did I, get those values and behaviors from?

The question of where we get our values from is at the heart of my book. What is remarkable is how ill-equipped many of us are to answer it. A hundred or even as recently as fifty years ago, no one would have struggled. Back then, you could have asked most anyone in the world, rich or poor, Western or non-Western, where they get their core values from, and they would have been able to give a clear and direct answer. Most would have pointed to a religion or spiritual tradition; others to an ideology, such as communism; and a handful of eccentrics might have named a philosophy or philosopher.

The situation is different nowadays, mainly due to the decline of religious belief and practice. To consider only the most populous Anglophone liberal democracies, recent surveys of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand show that 30, 53, 32, 40, and 49 percent, respectively, of

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citizens in those countries claim no religion. In fact, people who tick the “no religion” box on the census are the fastest-growing population of religious affiliation, or in this case, nonaffiliation.

This book is written primarily, though not exclusively, for those of us without religious affiliation. If that is you—and let’s be frank, as this is a book on ethics and political philosophy published by a university press, the odds are high—I ask you to ponder a question. Put the book down for a moment, dear reader, and ask yourself, “Where do I get my values from?” I am not just talking about your highest-order principles about right and wrong but also your sense of what is good, normal, and worthwhile in life, and if I can put it this way, your general vibe too. What could you point to as the source for that?

I am willing to bet that you had no good answer, or at least nothing immediately ready to hand. I say so with confidence because whenever I’ve pestered my students, friends, and colleagues with this question, they are almost always stumped. Their impulse is to say one of three things: “from my experience,” “from friends and family,” or “from human nature.” But to that, and only endearing myself further, I reply that these are not suitable answers. Personal experience, friends and family, and human nature are situated and formed within wider social, political, and cultural contexts. So I ask again, “What society-or-civilization-sized thing can you point to as the source of your values? I’m talking about the kind of thing that were you Christian, you’d just say, ‘Ah, the Bible,’ or ‘Oh, my church.’”

At this point the conversation tends to peter out. I worry that my interlocutor thinks I’m implying that something is wrong with them, as if they lacked a moral or spiritual compass. The opposite is closer to the truth. It is fascinating how people who seem, as far as I can tell, happy and put together, and do not feel

adrift or unfulfilled, fail to recognize, or even think to ask, from what tradition they learned how to become themselves.

You do not have to be Socrates, who declared philosophy to be the pursuit of self-knowledge, to see this as a problem. It is good and proper for people partying on a beach not to wonder why they are the way they are. It is something else for these same people, in moments of calm reflection, to be more or less in the dark as to where they get their character and moral sensibility from. It is a problem for self-awareness: you may not appreciate how your moral and emotional life hangs together the way it does. It is a problem for self-development: you may not know how to deepen as well as better enjoy the ideals and commitments you already profess, nor see what resources are available to help you do that. And it is a problem for self-preservation: if you happen to live at a time when the tradition that is the key to you is under attack, you may be ignorant of the personal or even existential stakes of that situation.

I believe that most of my readers should identify *liberalism* as the source of their values: not just of their political opinions, but of who they are through and through. Liberalism, to recall my earlier phrase, is that society-or-civilization-sized thing that may well underlie who and how you (and I, and we) are in all walks of life, from the family to workplace, from friendship to enmity, from humor to outrage, and everything in between.

Over the next few pages, I will introduce this argument in a patient and careful manner. I will specify what I mean by liberalism, identify its principles and ideals, account for how they shape our sense of self, explain how we might cultivate these commitments, and suggest why that might be a good thing to do. For now, though, let me return to Christmas Day 2016. Suppose a reveler had noticed that I looked a bit dazed. Further suppose, improbably, that they had asked me what was on my

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mind. Like them, I would have had a couple of drinks. Tipsy and emboldened, I might have said something like,

Hey, maybe you don't know the source of your morality, but I do; it's liberalism, and it can be a great way to live. The good news is that it's all around us, already in our bones, and we don't have to go looking for some ancient or distant piece of wisdom for how to live well. We just need to double down and take seriously what we already have. The bad news is that it's under attack right now and may well be displaced as the default morality of our time. That sucks for a lot of reasons, but a big one is that should it happen, our source of self can't be taken for granted anymore. It'll suffer the same fate, say, as Christianity in the Western world: a viable option, sure, but just one of many, and no longer the background of our world.

Had I given this speech (nay, sermon), I would have blushed the next morning. Among its many embarrassments is the lack of liberal virtues. There's not much modesty in telling my interlocutor who they are deep down. Nor is there appreciation of pluralism in presuming they don't already subscribe to some other worldview. Worst is the impression of moralism it gives off. Outside forces seem to be the only threat to liberalism, rather than potential limitations in the doctrine itself or a failure of so-called liberal people to live up to its demands. Illiberalism, it would seem, is other people.

Despite all of that, I want to let it stand. Like the day itself, my little speech has the truth of caricature. The suggestion I put to my readers is that liberalism may be at the root of all things us. What we find funny, outrageous, or meaningful; how we comport ourselves in friendship and romance; and the ideals that we set for ourselves as citizens, professionals, neighbors, and family members—maybe all of these things, from

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seemingly distinctive spheres of life, draw on one and the same source. The goal of this book is to offer an integrated account of a way of living that is prominent and available today. Success in this endeavor depends on the persuasiveness of my depiction of liberalism and whether it clicks with the sense that readers have of themselves. But at the outset, I'll say this. If you struggle to identify a source for your values, yet feel skeptical of or uncomfortable with the suggestion that liberalism may be it, I have one more question to keep in mind while reading this book: Honestly, what else do you have?

The Water We Swim In

IN 2005, NOVELIST AND ESSAYIST David Foster Wallace gave a commencement address at Kenyon College, Ohio. He opened with a vignette that is half joke, half parable: “There are two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’”¹

The moral of the story is that the most obvious and important realities can sometimes be the hardest to think and talk about. This metaphor of water is a good place to start our discussion about liberalism. For it strikes me that its defenders today are rather like the two young fish and its critics are like the older fish.

Let me explain. The dictionary definition of *liberalism* is a “social and political philosophy” based on “support for or advocacy of individual rights, civil liberties, and reform tending towards individual freedom, democracy, or social equality.”² There is much to unpack here. But the first thing to notice is that everything in this definition belongs to the realm of law and politics, broadly understood. When we talk about liberalism, it seems

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that we're in the land of constitutions, rights, policy, voting, and the like.

People who identify as liberal today think of it along these lines. Academics, journalists, politicians, and officials represent (and when pressed, defend) liberalism by listing the main social and political institutions associated with it, such as individual rights, rule of law, separation of powers, judicial review, free and fair elections, progressive taxation, and open markets. None of that is incorrect. Those are the core institutions of liberalism. Yet framed this way, liberalism refers to things *in* the water instead of the water itself. It refers to coral, shells, whales, and kelp, as opposed to the water and its currents.

Critics of liberalism, conservative ones especially, see it differently—closer to the older fish, assuming he loathed the water quality. These critics conceive of liberalism only secondarily in terms of legal and political institutions. Much more significant is liberalism as a worldview and value system—one that in recent decades has consolidated its power everywhere in Western societies. On this account, liberalism has infiltrated not just the usual suspects of news media, pop culture, public school, and universities, but also fundamental aspects of everyday existence, such as sexuality, child-rearing, friendship, and professional life. “Liberalism,” says a prominent academic critic, “is thus not merely, as is often portrayed, a narrowly political project of constitutional government and juridical defense of rights. Rather, it seeks to transform all of human life and the world.”³ Or in the coolly delivered diatribe of a sitting US attorney general, “[Liberals] have marshaled all the forces of mass communication, popular culture, the entertainment industry, and academia in an unremitting assault on religion and traditional values.”⁴ Say what you like about such attacks, but they're about water; liberal principles, values, and sensibilities have

become so pervasive as to be mistaken for common sense or even human nature. To recast the joke, it would read, “Morning, boys,” sneers an older fish, “How’s the liberalism?” And the two young liberals swim on for a bit, sipping their koi lattes, and eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is liberalism?’”

I will engage these critics later. But I should put my cards on the table. I disagree with their condemnation of liberalism as a politically noxious and personally debilitating worldview. But their assessment of the scope of liberalism is correct. Its ideals and sensibilities are indeed omnipresent in the public and background culture of Western democratic societies. And because I agree with their assessment of scope, I cannot adopt the standard definition of liberalism as a primarily legal and political doctrine. The older fish is onto something that, ironically, more deeply and accurately captures how liberalism is lived and experienced by liberals themselves.

My book is about a political topic (namely liberalism), yet better classified as a work on ethics, living well, and a genre I want to lean into, self-help. This is a crowded marketplace. To say nothing of bestsellers, in my own corner of academic publishing in philosophy, dozens of books have been written in recent years as secular (that is, not faith-based) guides to navigate modern life.⁵ I’ve read many, always with pleasure and profit. I’ve even contributed to the genre.⁶ Granted, at the current rate of production, we’ll have inspiration to last several lifetimes. But that’s a good thing! The decline of organized religion in Western liberal democracies means an enormous readership looking for plenitude and purpose.

Where does my book sit in relation to this literature? Whatever its merits and faults, it is unique in one respect. It seeks meaning and fulfillment by diving deeper into the

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mainstream culture we inhabit as opposed to seeking it elsewhere. To exaggerate for effect, may their authors forgive me, we could say that all the recent “how to live well” books in philosophy are variations on the title of Elizabeth Gilbert’s hit, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything across Italy, India, and Indonesia* (2007). On this model, the solution to the unhappiness and malaise of contemporary Western societies is to venture elsewhere in search of alternatives. Only this time, instead of leaving New York City for Italy, India, and Indonesia, remedies are sought in the distant past (the ancient Greeks or Scottish Enlightenment, for example), non-Western places (China or Africa, for instance), philosophies that resist the inauthentic or repressive spirit of modern life (say, existentialism or psychoanalysis), or artifacts and activities seen as reprieves from it (like fine art or travel).

Liberalism as a Way of Life is not like that, which brings us back to the idea of liberalism as the water we swim in, along with my suggestion to dive deeper into it. What do I mean by water? Two things. First, echoing the younger fish, liberal *water* refers to the fundamental legal and political institutions of liberal democratic societies (such as individual rights, separation of powers, progressive taxation, open markets, and judicial review) as well as the public (or political, if you prefer) culture of how citizens and officials comport themselves as members of them. This may sound abstract and remote, but it is not. The institutions and relationships they sustain are the stuff of everyday life. When, for example, we take for granted that goods at the supermarket cost the same for everyone, that’s liberalism in action. The same goes for our expectation of fair treatment by government officials no matter who we are. Hence the turbulent situation we find ourselves in today, where public institutions of our democracies (for instance, a tax policy that favors the wealthy or justice

system that is structurally discriminatory) elicit widespread distrust and anger precisely because they are seen to disregard their liberal principles.

The second thing *water* refers to is what the older fish puts his fin(ger) on: the background culture of Western democratic countries. By *background culture*, I mean something vast: essentially everything that is not the public culture, and that spans civil society (including the workplace, media, social media, and clubs and associations of all kinds) and the private sphere (including personal and romantic relationships along with the family).

Obviously, modern societies are plural, and include all manner of worldviews and ways of living that do not derive from liberalism, are not reducible to liberalism, or alternatively, are actively illiberal (in the sense of opposing liberal tenants). Yet as the older fish and I stress, albeit for opposite reasons, it is a big mistake to overlook or underplay how ubiquitous liberal values and sensibilities are in the background culture of contemporary Western democratic countries. A key claim I make in this book and reinforce with plenty of extended examples is that most popular culture produced in liberal democracies today would be unintelligible to an audience not already steeped in liberal norms, values, and sensibilities. Not all popular culture is united in support of liberalism. Much of it is intended to parody and challenge liberal dogmas. But that only reinforces the fact that liberalism has entrenched itself as the central point of reference.

To preview what I mean, here are a few places where liberalism can be found today: when we pick up a novel by Sally Rooney that dissects the power dynamics of sex and class; when we read a satire by Kevin Kwan about the clashes between individualism and tradition; when we watch comedians like Kumail Nanjiani and Dave Chappelle skewer identity politics; when we binge television shows like *The Office* and *Brooklyn*

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Nine-Nine that reimagine the workplace as a setting for self-realization; when we consume such eat-the-rich entertainments as *White Lotus* and *Succession*; when we listen to Beyoncé reclaim her power on *Lemonade*; when we see Disney princesses (from Ariel, to Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel, Merida, Elsa and Anna, Moana, and Raya) strive to learn and become who they were meant to be; when we gift *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* to a niece or daughter as a modern-day lives of the saints; when we play a video game like *The Last of Us Part II*, the violence of which is matched only by its perspectivism; when we consult human resource codes of conduct about respectful workplace relations; when we visit pornhub.com and the tab for gay pornography is right there on the home page; and even when we tune into reality shows like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, *Love Is Blind*, *Love on the Spectrum*, and *Indian Matchmaking*, all of which turn romance into a buyer's market. No item on this list is explicitly about liberalism, yet none would be slightly comprehensible without it. Just try, if you are familiar with any one item, to imagine how you would summarize it to someone who did not understand, as opposed to someone who agreed or disagreed with, the principle that everyone is free to lead the kind of life they want so long as it does not interfere with the ability of others to do the same (to name only one signature liberal idea). It would be like sending a code without the cipher on the receiving end. That is why I say that liberalism is the water of our times. Written into our foundational institutions, and underlying so much of the culture we daily live and breathe, liberalism has seeped into our pores so as to profoundly and personally shape who we are.

With this wide scope of liberalism in mind, I can state the thesis of the book: liberalism can be the basis for a personal worldview, way of living, and spiritual orientation. You don't

need to be liberal *plus* something else, such as Christian, Buddhist, utilitarian, or hedonist. It is possible, and I contend, rewarding and sufficient, to be liberal through and through. This does not mean that such a person would live their life, and relate to friends and family, in the manner of a citizen interacting with fellow citizens in the public forum. That would be psychologically implausible and ethically stultifying (not to mention socially suicidal). What I propose is that the values and attitudes enshrined in liberal social and political institutions, and everywhere present in the public and background culture of liberal democracies, can and often do inform a much more general sensibility—one supple enough to be realized differently and appropriately in all aspects of life. The good life, for such people, is the liberal life. It is not a model they wish to impose on anyone else. But it is theirs, and for them, more than enough.

This argument is descriptive and normative. It is descriptive in that I claim that a great many people living in Western democracies are already liberals in this robust sense. One ambition for my book is to serve as a mirror for readers and elicit a spark of recognition that, yes, liberalism is the basis of their own way of life. We are liberals all the way down, and consciously or not, hold liberalism as our conception of the good life.

To avoid any misunderstanding, let me state an important qualification. No one in this globalized age is anything “all the way down.” There are, for example, no Christians all the way down—no one of Christian faith whose worldview is not entangled with other cultural influences (such as nationalism, democracy, the ethics of capitalism, and liberalism, or going further back, Greek philosophy and various paganisms). There are, moreover, no Christians whose identities, social roles, and personal interests are entirely reducible to their Christianity—as parent or friend, for instance, or a professional or sports fan.

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Still, we have no difficulty understanding someone who says, “I’m Christian.” Why should the bar be higher for liberals? We are “liberal” to the same degree and depth that they are “Christian.” Neither worldview is pure and hermetically sealed off from myriad influences, yet both are the moral and spiritual centers of full and well-rounded personalities. Hence my descriptive aim: to make clear how liberalism already plays this role in the lives of many (and perhaps most) readers of this book.

My argument is also normative in that I propose that liberalism is a *good* way of life. I’m not suggesting that it is better than other ways of life. Any self-respecting liberal would by doctrine and disposition shrink from such a claim. But I have no qualms asserting that a liberal way of life has its own perks and felicities. This is why a key purpose of my book is to demonstrate how a liberal way of life has rewards for those who commit to it, as distinct from its wider effects on our societies, or the advancement of democracy and social justice. Being liberal is an intrinsically fulfilling, generous, and fun way to be.

In identifying liberalism as the water in which we swim, and by adding that a liberal way of life can be good and rewarding, I may sound obnoxiously triumphalist or depressingly complacent. If liberalism is everywhere in our public and background culture, it might be tempting to kick up our feet and suppose we are already living the dream. It would be nice, cynically put, to think that a liberal way of life could be acquired or maybe even realized by switching on Netflix to enjoy the latest algorithmically generated rom-com.

That would be a grave mistake in more ways than one. It would be an error or misapprehension, certainly, but one that leads to all kinds of nasty attitudes that liberals are accused of, such as self-satisfaction and sanctimony. Later in the book, I give this danger a name, *liberaldom*, a term adapted from theologian

Søren Kierkegaard's critique of Christendom, to refer to how easy it is to pat oneself on the back for being (notionally) liberal in a social and political world that is itself (notionally) liberal. The general idea is that a genuinely liberal way of life, along with its felicities, does not come automatically from living or even having been raised in liberal democracy. It takes work and must be cultivated by the individual themselves. That is why, in addition to its descriptive and normative goals, this book has a practical task: to lay out techniques ("spiritual exercises," I call them) that readers can adopt at any time should they wish to deepen and enrich a liberal way of life. All great world religions are replete with such exercises. Prayer, dialogue, song, meditation, and fasting are intended to initiate conversion and sustain conviction. Liberalism needs its own versions. Its doctrine is no less noble, its conception of the good life no less demanding, and the quality of its spiritual life no less beatific.

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