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Notions of Liberty- Traditional and Modern

Honors Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements of HON 420

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By

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Faculty Mentor

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Notions of Liberty- Traditional and Modern

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Abstract

This essay examines, primarily, how notions of liberty have evolved over time in America. Starting from the point of establishing America's foundation in Thomistic natural law, the essay then seeks to identify, define, and analyze different segments of American political thought that have sprung off from this starting point. Three segments are identified, Conservatism, Liberalism, and Progressivism, and then defined on how they view the self. The conservatives from God, the liberals from reason, and the progressives from how the individual interacts with society. After this, these different segments of American political thought are contrasted by viewing how they offer different prescriptions on how gender should be legislated. From this contrast, it becomes clear that, as America has progressed from its natural law beginnings to modernity, notions of liberty and the self-have moved in a decidedly inward fashion, from God and his prescriptions to the self and its desires. While this essay does not make any assertions on the positivity or lack thereof of this shift, it does make substantive claims on the strengths and weaknesses of these segments of thought, primarily on the grounds of how much order they provide for both the self and society.

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Introduction

In 1787, when the American Constitution was ratified, there was no way the founders could have known that their fledgling, disorganized, and weak union would turn into the de facto global superpower of the modern age. There was no way the founders could have known the internet, or the cell phone, or any other modern comfort would creep into and help shape life. In the realm of politics, there was no way they could have known that voting would, in modern America, be an expansive and easily acquired right. There was no way they could have known that Senators would become popularly elected. There was no way they could have known how different America would look 230 years into the future. In large part, America's great shifts since its founding are largely as a result of its ideological shift. Though commonly, America is viewed as a place that uniformly glorifies concepts like liberty and free speech, this is a vexed concept. Different Americans offer different views. This is because, in American thought, the concept of liberty has changed from the pre-modern to contemporary era due to changing conceptions of the self. The founders saw the world through the eyes of the natural law, and this is a position echoed by modern conservatives. However, as America has moved into modernity, two other traditions, liberalism and progressivism, have also shaped how Americans view the self. The goal of this essay then, is to examine this changing notion of liberty and the self, and to analyze the implications this shift both philosophically and practically, making the argument that In American thought, the concept of liberty has changed from the pre-modern to contemporary era due to shifting conceptions of the self.

The Conservative Perspective- An Introduction

“To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.”

Michael Oakeshott

American Conservatism, especially today, is an ideology quite difficult to pin down. When looking at it from the perspective of political factions, the American Republican party is a hodge podge of competing ideologies: populists vs elitists, neoconservatives vs isolationists, libertarians vs authoritarians. It would be difficult to, if considering conservatism at the party level, espouse a sort of “conservative” vision that can be effectively discussed. Because of this, then, one must get away from the partisan politics associated with conservatism and instead focus on the scholarship that has propelled the ideology into prominence. The ideas from this scholarship, which come from scholars like William F. Buckley Jr and Michael Oakeshott among others, create something akin to a cohesive political vision. The American conservative fashions themselves as, to quote from Buckley, “standing athwart history, yelling Stop!”. This is not to say the American conservative is against progress, in any respect. Rather, it is to assert that American conservatives see, “a great deal of good in the imperfect world, which they cautiously hope to improve, always aware that their own nature partakes of that imperfection” (Knowles 151). For Conservatives, the world as constructed is largely worth preserving. Improvement, when it happens, is slow going. It is dangerous, from the Conservative perspective, to throw out what works. This introduction is but a snippet of the larger Conservative argument, but it sets the table for the coming discussion.

Building Blocks: A Shared Tradition

Before diving into any comparative analysis of America's contemporary Conservative, Liberal, and Progressive ideologies, and how these ideologies impact the self, it is necessary to first establish the shared political tradition from which both schools of thought originate. By doing so, the basis for contrast between conservative and progressive will emerge, and perhaps soften what might be an otherwise acrimonious discussion. With this stated, we can now begin to investigate what the shared tradition between America's competing ideologies is.

To frame this discussion of what tradition both conservatism and progressivism share, it seems relevant to start at America's founding. After all, both American conservatism and progressivism are ideologies that function in the greater *American* system, which would imply that they, in some regard, are connected at this most crucial point. To do this, one can observe the writing of scholar E. Robert Statham in his essay, *The Crisis of the American Political Tradition*. Among other ideas Statham wrestles within this essay, he discusses the purpose of the American Constitution, America's founding document. Discussing the Constitution, he writes, "The American Constitution establishes the rule of law for the purpose of institutionally and structurally regulating self-interested human nature in service of the public good" (Statham 249). This statement from Statham establishes two key terms that are of vital importance for this discussion. One, Statham asserts that the Constitution (which can be extended to

governance more broadly) is aimed at regulating human nature, or the actions of man. This is important for clear reasons. Politics is, quite literally, the study of human interaction. It will be central to this investigation. Two, Statham alludes to, at the end of his argument, the idea of “the public good”. This concept is integral to the concept of governance as it is how politics is applied in the real world. By analyzing these two concepts espoused by Statham, the political tradition shared by both conservatism and progressivism will emerge.

Starting with Statham’s first concept, the idea that government is responsible for regulating human nature, one must say that this is not a concept he pulled from thin air. Instead, as Statham notes later in his essay, the idea of human nature and more importantly its regulation is one that is borne out of a rich intellectual tradition. He writes, “the law (Constitution) must be grounded in a transcendent standard if it is to be meaningful and authoritative” (Statham 250). This “transcendent standard” Statham is referring to is what both conservatism and progressivism base their ideologies on. Exposing what that standard is, and where it comes from is crucial to understanding the shared launch point both conservatism and progressivism set off from.

The Transcendent Standard: Natural Law

In America’s first “national document”, the Declaration of Independence, the founders declare that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”. This statement on the part of the founders was not a careless appeal to some higher power to seem more complex. Rather, it was the founders’ assertion that they had a profound belief in the Natural law, given to them by

God, and the ability of this Natural law to form the basis of political state. The founders, “believed in, and based the nation's independence on, the Natural law; that is, that God, in creating the universe, implanted in the nature of man a body of Law to which all human beings are subject.” (Barker 105). Foundationally speaking, America is a nation founded on the principles of the natural law. At first, this idea of the “Natural law” might seem like a vacuous concept, and for good reason. Many intellectuals, philosophers, theologians, and politicians throughout history have contributed to and made appeals with the concept. Because of this, the scope of what this paper means by Natural law must be narrowed.

For the purposes of understanding conservatism and progressivism’s shared tradition, it is wisest to understand the Natural law as what scholar Robert S. Barker calls, “the Natural law that for two millennia had been a traditional and essential element of Western Civilization” (Barker 106). That is to say, the Natural law finds its roots with established thinkers like Aristotle and Aquinas, rather than with the Enlightenment thinkers contemporary for the time. This distinction is important, as it will help inform American progressivism’s digression from the founding tradition later in the paper. For now, though, it is only important that one recognizes that, for the founders, the Natural law found its roots in the classical-Christian synthesis of the Middle Ages, and not in the Age of Reason.

With the bounds for what is and is not “Natural law” from the perspective of America’s founding established, the understanding of the Natural law held by the founders is now ready for examination. To do this, one can examine the writings of Thomas Aquinas, the West’s pre-eminent Natural law theorist. Aquinas, a Catholic

theologian, is helpful to start with because he, in his theorizing, synthesized the work of his intellectual predecessors, taking the best of scholars like Plato and Aristotle and creating out of it a framework from which one can derive the *Natural law*. For Aquinas, the Natural law does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is one Law in a system of Laws that order the world. In his theory, Aquinas starts with the Eternal Law, or “God’s rational purpose and plan for all things” (Dimmock and Fisher 66). This is the undergirding principle from which all other laws follow. Put more concretely, Aquinas’s other systems are simply how different groups interact with (and obey) the Eternal Law.

This idea of interaction is important to discerning Aquinas because he, as a teleologist, believes everything has a purpose, and follows a plan. As scholar Andrew Dimmock points out, for Aquinas, “something is good in as far as it fulfills its purpose/plan” (Dimmock and Fisher 67). This plan, as noted previously, is the Eternal Law. For objects, this interaction with Aquinas’s Eternal Law is easy to see. Take a tree, for example. A tree’s *telos*, its purpose, is to grow and survive in the forest. It uses, among other actions, photosynthesis to achieve this task. A tree fulfills its purpose, its interaction with the Eternal Law, inasmuch as it successfully facilitates growing and surviving in the forest. Good trees grow and survive, bad trees do not. However, this becomes more complicated when considering humans, because our purpose is, at least from the surface, unclear.

For Aquinas, what defines human purpose is *reason*. It is what differentiates a human from a cup or a pencil. What is right, what is aiming at humanity’s *telos*, then is, “acting according to reason” (Dimmock and Fisher 67). This can be stated more specifically as humanity acting accordingly to their rational nature. If humanity does

this, then in Aquinas's eyes, they are partaking in the Natural law, the Eternal Law as it applies to humans. Of course, Aquinas's Natural law is not an empty or subjective concept. It is, rather, an active discernment of 'the good', or the "natural standard of value and excellence." (Donnelly 521). The word discernment, as opposed to discovery or creation, is important to note because it implies that the Natural law is the human application of the Eternal, and not some manmade structure. So, if reason is what discerns the natural law, and establishes a standard of excellence at the heart of this law, what then, for Aquinas, is humanity's discernment revealing.

As Aquinas sees it, assuming all humans are acting in accord with their reason, a few primary precepts of natural law are revealed. The first of which being that, "Good is to be done and pursued and evil avoided" (ST I-II, 94, 2). By this, Aquinas means that humanity should pursue things that reason determines as intelligible goods. This precept is best understood, however, as a qualified enumeration of pursuing the good and not an encompassing statement, because some bad decisions are made in pursuance of the good. Take for instance, a person who overindulges on cake. Even though the person is making a bad decision- eating too much cake- they are still pursuing good, in this case being the cake's sweet taste. This, otherwise known as gluttony, is what Aquinas calls the pursuit of an apparent good. A pursuit of the true good, what Aquinas is referring to in his first statement, would be the reasonable application of this cake consumption. One would eat, and even enjoy the cake, but they would not indulge in excess.

From this first principle flow the rest of Aquinas's natural precepts. These are best thought of as general rules any person could come to if using their faculties of reason, and not prescriptions. He lists three. The first principle Aquinas derives is borne

out of humanity's "inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances"(ST I-II, 94, 2). Like any other substance, humanity seeks to preserve its own being. Therefore, whatever is for the preservation of human life belongs to the natural law. Humanity has an obligation to, if they are to act in accordance with the Natural law, protect and preserve human life. The second principle Aquinas derives is borne out of humanity's, "inclination to things that pertain to him more specially, according to that nature which he has in common with other animals"(ST I-II, 94, 2). Humanity, like Earth's animals, has certain natural desires, which, if pursued virtuously, belong to the Natural law. Aquinas highlights these desires as marriage, the procreation of children, and education of those children. So, humanity, if acting in accordance with the Natural law, has an obligation to marry, procreate, and educate their young. The third principle Aquinas derives is borne out of humanity's, "inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society" (ST I-II, 94, 2). In essence, humanity has a proclivity to discover God in the world, and humanity wants to be communal. So, to be in accordance with the Natural law, humanity must do these things.

From these primary precepts flow many intermediate and practical prescriptions. Far too many for this paper to analyze. However, to give an example of how specific rules flow out from broad precepts in Natural law, one can consider what flows out of Aquinas's last principle, man's inclination to live in society. Aquinas puts forward that humanity, to live in accordance with the Natural law, must live in society. This implies that humanity should operate in a way consistent with living in such a place. For example, for humanity to live in society, they cannot make a habit of stealing from the other members of society. So, a specific rule: "Do not steal" is borne out of humanity's

inclination to live in society, because society would struggle in a place where stealing was condoned. To take this rule to its most particular, one could instruct a person to “restrain themselves from stealing from their neighbor”, which makes the rule “Do not steal”, and therefore the principle of humanity living in society, apply to a particular case. These principles by themselves help assert what the Natural law is and what encapsulates, but they do little on their own to help people make choices. After all, Aquinas’s precepts might, in some cases, conflict with one another. For example, a person might, to preserve life, tell a lie, which would violate man’s inclination to live in society. Recognizing this, Aquinas proposes that humanity must exercise virtue (the habit of directing desires properly with reason), to discern the precepts of the natural law that affect the choices most proximate to them in the day to day.

The Founders and Natural Law

Returning to America's founding, now that its Natural law origins have been examined, one can consider how this informed the founders creation of laws for society. As has been established by this paper, the natural law on its own does little to inform the choices one should make in one's day-to-day life. This means that it must be supplemented by virtue to be tenable for a group of people. Virtue, which simply means that which makes its subject good, is encouraged by what Aquinas calls the human law. This law, created by governors for the governed, for the purpose of, "making those to whom it is given, good, either simply or in some particular respect"(ST I-II, 92, 1). In this way, the human law is itself, when properly constructed, an impression of the Natural law on specific circumstances. Donnelly points this concept out well when he writes, "natural law, man's participation in the divine reason, is restricted to general precepts. These precepts are then applied to specific circumstances. Aquinas calls these specifications of the natural law human laws" (Donnelly 521). As Donnelly states, human law is how the Natural law is applied to specific circumstances. There is an element to human law, however, that is unique. Human law is, "distinguished from other acts and practices aiming at this same goal by their binding character and the backing of coercive public enforcement" (Donnelly 521). Human law is enforceable. One cannot impose the precept, "preserve life". One can make murder punishable by death. In this, human law's utility is shown. It is an effective way of impressing virtue upon the citizens who live under it, and this is something the founders took great note of.

The Declaration of Independence makes this fact clear. After the first sentence, in which the founders appeal to Nature and Nature's God, the founders state that, "to secure

these rights (life, liberty, and the pursuit of property) Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed”. For the founders, government was created to protect and facilitate the usage of natural rights, otherwise considered interactions with the Natural law. Now, the extent to which the founders would say that natural rights are facilitated by human laws is a subject of debate. They were inherently distrustful of government and preferred as much “freedom” to exercise their natural rights. Even with that, though, the important thing to note is that the founders based America on the Natural law, the rights that flow from that, and the government’s responsibility to protect such rights.

The Conservative Tradition- Conserving the Good

From this responsibility to protect natural rights flows the Conservative position of the self. Remember that for the founders, humanity’s natural rights flow out of the “divine”. They understood the human self as an integrated embodiment of both body and soul, hylomorphic. The American Conservative tradition, which is driven intellectually by largely religious thinkers (with few exceptions), has this same hylomorphic understanding as the founders. Humanity is not just a body floating in space creating some inner meaning in the absence of an inherited one. Nor is humanity just a soul that, with its own wants and desires, transcends and makes irrelevant the body other than its utility in working out the wants of the soul. Rather, humanity is body and soul, united.

This assertion has a few implications for how the Conservative view of the self manifests in both philosophy and action. First and foremost (and revealed by the name

Conservative), is the Conservative insistence ofhylomorphism as a fixed concept. In other words, the Conservative position on the self is that it, at root, cannot change. There is no “re-definition” of the self waiting in the wings. Therefore, as scholar John Kekes points out, “The fundamental aim of conservatism is to conserve the political arrangements that have shown themselves to be conducive to good lives” (Kekes 351). Because their understanding of the self is fixed, Conservatives aim at conserving what effectively catalyzes a good life for the hylomorphic person. Discerning what meets this bar of conservation is crucial to understanding how the Conservative view of the self shows itself in action.

If one were to be a reductionist, summarizing what Conservatives believe to be helpful is a simple endeavor. What God says is good is good, and thus it should be conserved. What God says is bad is bad, and thus it should be thrown out. This assessment, though easy to internalize and recite, is far from the complete idea. This is because, while religion does feature heavily in the shaping of Conservative thought, and should by no means be discounted, religion is not the only principle from which Conservatives form their thoughts. Instead, it is better to understand religion as one factor, an important one at that, that informs what O. Carter Snead calls an “Anthropology of Embodiment”. This anthropology, which Snead puts forward in his book *What It Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*, is characterized by a kind of remembering in which the human person remembers, “who we are and how we got here.” (Snead 97). In Snead’s vision, one must remember that they enter the world weak and vulnerable (infancy), and all that entails. One must, when entering the world, rely on others for food, shelter, and moral instruction. Crucially

though, in Snead's vision, one must not believe that, once they mature, they lose this reliance. Instead, in a normal life trajectory, a person will require care in some form or fashion from cradle to grave- be it emotional, financial, or otherwise.

This care one receives in their vulnerability is properly understood as a gift given unconditionally. Consider parents and the children they raise. What, if anything, do these children have to offer their parents in the way of recompense? Outside of love, very little. Despite this, parents make the conscious decision to sacrifice parts of their own lives to help their children. They give them care, when all their children can do is receive it. Remembering this care should, Snead argues, "awaken in us a profound sense of gratitude and sense that a fitting response to such care is to... become one who cares for others without condition or calculation" (Snead 98). Having this worldview pays the unconditional care one receives throughout their life forward and creates a framework that makes people look outward and see their own flourishing as a result of participating in the network of gift and receipt that sustains human relationships. Abstracting this concept of gratitude and gift to something that works definitionally, it makes sense to say that Conservatives conserve those, "goods, virtues, and practices" (Snead 99) that are conducive to facilitating participation in the network of gift and receipt outlined in the anthropology of embodiment that Snead offers.

But what are those goods, virtues, and practices that Conservatives feel a responsibility to conserve? What aids the hylomorphic person to greater flourishing, which, as defined in this paper, is engaging within the network of gift and receipt? Snead finds his answer in the writing of Alasdair MacIntyre and what he refers to as the virtues of acknowledged dependence, which provide the baseline for Snead's proposal for

facilitating human flourishing. These virtues are not, to be clear, exclusive. They do not, by their application, throw out any other traditionally enumerated virtues, like justice or courage. Rather, these virtues are meant to provide context for the interpersonal relationships found at the heart of Snead's philosophy, whereas other virtues like temperance, for example, are meant to provide context to live well individually in the world (MacIntyre 120). While MacIntyre lists many different virtues of acknowledged dependence, Snead highlights one that connects them all. He calls this concept *genuine friendship*, or the "relationships of persons who make one another's goods their own" (Snead 102). Genuine friendship between persons is what, for Snead, maximizes human flourishing. It allows people to act benevolently in the world understood in this light, what Conservatives want to conserve, or at least, their modus for conservation, becomes clearer. Conservatives, operating from understanding that the hylomorphic body is itself a fixed state, want to conserve those goods, virtues, and practices that best promote human flourishing. This flourishing, in large part, is understood as the creation of friendship in which one radically-without thought of themselves- wills the good of the other, and the other reciprocates this same will.

The Conservative Tradition- Where We Are So Far

So, Conservatives, from this position of this paper, want to conserve what best promotes human flourishing, which is defined, in part, as radically self-giving friendship. This statement, while helpful for discerning why Conservatives are moved to action, still does little to help reveal what is best, specifically, for human flourishing from the Conservative perspective. For help with this, one can look towards the writing of L. Brent Bozell in his essay *Freedom or Virtue* as a launch point. In this essay, where

Bozell debates what is more important for the human person to choose between virtue and the freedom, he makes the statement that, “The Christian metaphysic attributes to man a pre-formed nature... Man’s nature, moreover, is totally integrated with that of the rest of being, so that a common effort is envisioned on the part of all creation to conform the divine patterns of order” (Bozell). In this statement, which also ushers back into view the Christian backbone that supplements the anthropology of embodiment that Snead asserts, Bozell makes a key claim that humanity has a common cause to conform to the divine patterns of order. Through this, one can marry Bozell’s Thomistic Natural law to Snead’s vision for human flourishing. Humanity, when adhering to the ‘divine patterns of order’, works together (genuine friendship) in common effort. One could even say that someone getting to Snead’s genuine friendship is the result of one adhering to the divine patterns of order.

It is clear, then, that Conservatives seek to conserve, to create the conditions necessary for Snead’s vision of human flourishing, that which assents to the divine order. At this point, one must ask: What is the divine order? Put quite simply, and getting back to where this analysis started, the divine order is Aquinas’s eternal law. More specifically, how humanity derives from the divine law concepts for their own lives, which, as this paper has established, is the natural law. The word “derives” is important for understanding what Conservatives conserve because it implies a sort of active reasoning in terms of developing what should be held onto. This is because, for Conservatives, discerning what should be conserved is essential for the whole process.

The Conservative Tradition-Conservatism in Action

Before analyzing this, though, it is important to point out that Snead's vision is by no means a catch-all for everyone that self-identifies as conservative. This is because, even if most conservatives share a preference for, as Michael Oakeshott puts it, "the familiar to the unknown, the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible", what they mean by that varies greatly. There are many different varieties of Conservatism, all with their considerable strengths and weaknesses. This paper focuses on natural law Conservatives because these conservatives provide the sharpest contrast to other conceptions of the self, but there are many other strands of the philosophy. Consider the complexities in the relationship between American traditionalist Conservatives (the conservatives of this paper) and American constitutional Conservatives. As defined by Peter Berkowitz, constitutional Conservatives, "put liberty first and teach the indispensableness of moderation in securing, preserving, and extending its blessings" (Berkowitz 1). They focus on upholding the freedom enshrined in the Constitution and keeping America in line with that Constitutional vision. They make value judgements based on what the Constitution seems to enshrine, and not a sweeping external moral philosophy. Ostensibly, this view aligns with the traditionalists, and in some respects it does, but when both are scraped down to their bases, a clear divergence emerges. This is because, as scholar Johnathan O'Neill points out, "Traditionalist conservatives hold that any civilization is defined more by culture and custom than by politics or a constitution" (O'Neill 304). So, even though traditionalists seek to preserve some of what the American Constitution contains, this preservation goes only as far as does the Constitution's ability to, "protect and facilitate a society's understanding of the good and virtuous life" (O'Neill 304). So, in places where the Constitution (and a conservatism

centered around it) fails to protect and facilitate the good and the virtuous, the traditional conservative feels a need to detach from the document.

Of course, a smart criticism of this proposed disagreement between traditional and constitutional conservatives is the assertion that the Constitution because it was made by people, is itself a derivation of culture, making the traditionalist point moot.

Additionally, as O'Neill later points out, modern traditional Conservatives argue against Constitutional Conservatism on the grounds that, "American constitutionalism contains opportunities within itself to be better than its modern elements" (O'Neill 318), instead of an argument that bends towards separation. Despite these criticisms, the essential point remains: Traditionalist conservatives and Constitutional conservatives disagree on the basis for their conservatism. Traditionalists find their basis in culture, and Constitutionalists find it in the Constitution.

When looked at in the abstract, this distinction seems minute. If both traditionalists and Constitutionalists seek to conserve, what does it matter how they get there? Immensely, it turns out, when the abstract becomes the specific. Consider marriage, for example. The traditionalist Conservative conception of marriage, as informed by Bozell's divine patterns of order, holds that marriage is the union of man and woman for the purposes of child-rearing and mutual help of the spouses. This is because, for the traditionalist, marriage naturally forms itself this way. Scholar Paul Gondreau makes this clear when, while describing how marriage is borne out of humanity's natural inclinations, writes, "the inclination to living in community joins with the inclination to procreation and to the rearing of children in the way that form joins with matter in order to inscribe in the deepest fabric of our being a most powerful inclination to marriage"

(Gondreau 569). For traditionalists, marriage fashions itself as the union between man and woman for these explicit purposes. This definition is contentious, yes, but one can see where the traditionalist comes to this position. On the other hand, for the Constitutional Conservative, the definition of marriage is a non-issue. For Constitutionalists, the question is not what the definition of marriage is, but rather, if the Constitution has any care for defining the term. This is why Constitutional Conservatives can, in the same breath where they enshrine the traditional definition, state that, “given the profound changes in sentiment and opinion, they (Conservatives) should refrain from using government to enforce the traditional understanding” (Berkowitz 5). The traditionalist would scoff at such a notion, and tension between the two camps would emerge.

This tension illustrates how conservatism, particularly the conservatism espoused in this paper, is not uniform. Ideologies differ and methodologies change. Even though they agree broadly, Traditional and Constitutional conservatives have meaningful disagreements, particularly when considering how something should be conserved. The Constitutional conservative binds themselves to the Constitution, and then limits how society might “progress” considering that. The Traditionalist conservative binds themselves to those traditions that were created with the moral philosophy of the natural law in mind, and acts in concert with this. This means that, for the Traditionalist, the action of conserving is proactive. Conserving the Good (as they see it), for the traditionalist is what matters, constitution or anything else be damned.

Ignored for too long, at this point one must offer for Conservatism a concrete definition of what needs to be conserved. Snead’s anthropology of embodiment makes

Conservatism's goal clear: hylomorphic persons acting for each other in total self-gift.

Kekes's emphasis on conserving political arrangements that are conducive to good lives helps reveal where Conservatism focuses its conservation. Bozell's 'divine forms of order' hint at some sort of idea of what those conserved structures look like.

Definitionally, however, that is not the full picture. This is because, though these definitions allow for getting from the abstract to the specific, they fail to appeal to any undergirding principle that informs any Conservative decision. To make that appeal and bring the Conservative vision into focus, one must return to Thomas Aquinas and his conception of the Natural law. Remember that for Aquinas, the Natural law derives itself from the divine, which itself comes from the eternal law. This is to say that the Natural law itself is an expression of the Divine Law. Which means that for Aquinas and by extension Natural law Conservatives, the Natural law comes from God, the Christian one. Understood in this light, Bozell's 'divine forms of order', which are Kekes's political arrangements, become much clearer. By divine, Bozell simply means those political arrangements that are instituted by God, which lead to the human flourishing that Snead discusses.

Returning to the issue of marriage, this provides a great example of what the Traditional conservative seeks to conserve, and how they might go about such conservation. From the above discussion on how Conservatism is not itself one uniform strain, the Traditional Conservative's conception of marriage is clear. One man and one woman for the purpose of procreation and mutual aid. In addition to this, it is also clear how the Traditional Conservative finds themselves with this definition: humanity has the inclination to procreate. Additionally, they have the inclination to live within the

confines of society. To marry the two inclinations together, marriage emerges as the natural unity. The Traditional Conservative seeks to conserve this natural unity because, in no small part, it has proven useful for most of civilized history. Ryan Anderson points this out when he writes, “Marriage is the fundamental building block of all human civilization” (Anderson 5). Marriage is the lowest political order. It is the bedrock layer for all other institutions. For this integral reason, among others, is why traditional Conservatives seek so strongly to conserve the institution. It is not enough to, like the constitutional Conservatives, prevent marriage from being redefined Constitutionally. It is not enough to keep the coercive force of government out of marriage. Instead, for the Traditional Conservative, the traditional definition of marriage must be proactively protected. This proactive protection could look like many things, which will be discussed at the end of the paper when it is time for comparison. Now though, it is important to note that the traditional Conservative framework espoused by this paper desires to enshrine and protect the divine patterns of order that have aided the human person immensely in their flourishing and this protection is not passive.

A Digression- The Liberal Tradition

Liberalism might be even harder to define than its Conservative counterpart. For some, liberalism is the classical position espoused by Locke and his contemporaries. For others, Liberalism is a political buzzword that right-wing commentators use to denote snowflakes and woke culture. Still for others, Liberalism is conflated with left-wing, progressive thought. In truth, Liberalism, as it will be defined in this paper- is none of those three. Instead, it should be considered first and foremost as an interpretive split with Conservatives on the meaning of the Natural law. In its infancy, Liberalism was

simply Natural law philosophy applied in a different, less coercive way. However, as time has gone on, Liberalism has itself shifted outside of the Natural law, instead choosing to base itself in a materialist and evolutionary schema. In doing this, Liberalism understands the human self, and liberty, in fundamentally different terms than Conservatism. Exploring this digression will help show why Liberalism and Conservatism come down in opposition to one another on social issues, and how the Liberals got to where they did.

Liberalism's Beginnings- Locke and the Social Contract

To understand American Liberalism as it exists today, one must first understand American Liberalism as it started. Similarly, to the Conservatives, who stake their philosophy in the divinely inspired Natural law, the Liberals take their cues from those laws that come from nature. The difference between the two is in where the Natural law manifests itself. As previously established, the Thomistic Natural law position held by the founders (and Conservatives) implies that humanity desires to be communal. Communities are formed naturally, out of the desire of the human heart. Conversely, Liberalism holds that humanity, ideally, exists outside of any established community, in what Locke calls "the state of nature". For a good summary of Locke's state of nature, one can turn to A. John Simmons, who writes, when discussing what a person in the state of nature possesses, that, "Persons enjoy in the state of nature their full complement of natural rights. A person's natural rights are a 'grant or gift from God,' which he possesses intact until he consents to enter a legitimate civil society, surrendering some of these rights in the process" (Simmons 456). In this description, the similarities to a Thomistic conception of the Natural law are obvious. First and foremost, in both Thomist and

Lockean construction, the Natural law is described as a gift from God. Additionally, in both the Thomistic and Lockean conceptions, the Natural law is something an individual attains by simply being. However, these interpretations are not mirror images of one another.

Consider, firstly, that Locke's conception of the Natural law implies that man foregoes his natural rights to a degree when he enters civil society. This is a clear difference from the Thomistic Conservative conception, where society only amplifies and strengthens those moral rights and obligations that a given person possesses. In this way, the Lockean conception puts forward a different, more negative view of civil society that places some important limiters on what society has the right to do in terms of how it can promote actions. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the Lockean conception of Natural law is much more strongly centered around what rights humanity has, divorced from fellow man. Remember that, for Conservatives, life is centered around an anthropology of embodiment, where gratitude drives mutual participation in a network of grace. It is essentially communal. Locke differs from this view. Humanity derives its meaning from how an individual person interacts with their *nature*, and not how an individual interacts rationally in their community, demonstrating how Locke frames the Natural law in a much more individualistic sense than the Conservatives. Frank Marini points this out well when he explains that Locke's conception of the Natural law was developed in, "opposition to arguments of divine right and paternalistic authority. The main thrust of the (Locke's) argument was to deny that one man was created to act upon the desires, thoughts, and will of another" (Marini 6). From Locke's perspective, humanity was created to act upon its own desires, given to them by God, free of coercion

from any other man. These desires themselves might be from God, but in their application, the desires are manifestly personal.

It is in this personal manifestation of natural rights found in Locke's Natural law Theory that modern liberalism clearly delineates from both America's Natural law founding and Conservatism. Before discussing this though, it is important to acknowledge that, with Conservatism, liberalism is by no means uniform. Some liberals today still focus their efforts on constructing society in the Lockean sense. Some, radically so. These and other digressions are not the focus of this paper. Instead, in this paper, efforts will be focused on those who define liberalism as scholar Judith Shklar defines it when she writes that "liberalism has only one overriding aim: to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom" (Shklar 1). Before cutting into that definition, though, an explanation of how Liberalism got from Locke and his personal expression of God-given rights to Shklar, and the personal expression of personal freedom is necessary.

For this, one can consider an argument made by Timothy Stanton, who asserts that, "the Liberal Locke assumed that the authority of government was the result of a commission from human beings to protect and maintain their rights" (Stanton 15). He then contrasts this view with the early Locke, who in his view, "assumed that the authority of government was the result of a divine commission" (Stanton 15). The early Locke and his view of authority aligns closely with the Lockean view asserted previously in this paper. People are given rights by God, and the communities they create are too given their authority by God. God is clearly imbued in the personal choices of the people. The Liberal, later Locke, or at least how Stanton reads him, aligns much more

closely with Shklar's definition of liberalism. Even if people are given their rights by God (and if they are not), the impetus for authority is on the consent of human beings for a government to maintain their rights. By interpreting Locke in this light, scholars like Stanton open the door for Liberalism to move away from the idea of God-given rights and how this informs notions of the self, and into a different, more individualized state.

Modern Liberalism

The best way of understanding this change is by analyzing how a modern liberal outlines the goal of their philosophy. Charles Larmore, in his book *The Morals of Modernity*, offers a pretty strong example for this. He writes, "The terms of political association must now be less comprehensive than the views of the good life about which reasonable people disagree... Fundamental political principles must express a moral conception that citizens can affirm together" (Larmore 123). If it were not clear already, Larmore's assertion in this quotation is a far cry from the God-given, God-inspired Liberalism of Locke. Larmore, unlike Locke, or the founders, or the Conservatives, argues from a position of plurality, wherein there exists a disagreement on the nature of the good life. This becomes all the clearer when he states that, "Freedom is not a univocal notion. There are many different ideals of freedom that, not necessarily to the exclusion of one another, we might pursue" (Larmore 123). This not to say, however, that the modern liberal sees a lack of consensus on what freedom is and then stops seeking it. Rather, it is most accurate to say that the modern liberal places most importance on, as Stephen Gardbaum puts it "holding that individual autonomy is the distinctively liberal moral ideal that the state has a duty to promote" (Gardbaum 386). So, where the founders broadly and conservatives specifically are concerned with

establishing and protecting a common good fixed around a set definition of the human self, the liberals are concerned, primarily, with securing for citizens the autonomy necessary to pursue their own, self-definition of the good. Liberalism, now understood as that which seeks to preserve individual autonomy, reads very closely to Shker's proposal that liberalism's goal is to protect an individual's ability to protect themselves.

At this point, an individual who is critical of modern Liberalism as in ideology might charge Liberalism with allowing, because it resists the inclination of outlining a hard definition of the person/the person's obligations, a whole horde of otherwise objectionable behavior. After all, the argument goes, a Conservative (for example) who seeks to protect and uphold the "anthropology of embodiment" can much more easily than a Liberal tell a bad actor what they are doing is wrong, specifically because the Liberal places special emphasis on preserving the autonomy of the individual and not what actions the individual does. This would, of course, heighten one's belief of this critique of liberalism. However, this critique is not as iron clad as one might at first believe. Larmore argues against this very charge when he writes, "Liberalism does not really equate liberty with license and law with burden... the liberal ideal of freedom rests upon fundamental moral duties we have to one another" (Larmore 124). In his view, while Liberalism casts a much wider net than the more restrictive worldviews discussed in this paper, it does not permit everything. Instead, Liberalism focuses on, at least interpersonally, making sure no one is infringing on anyone else. So, a person is allowed to do as they please in relation to how they respect someone else's right to the same.

This idea has great implications for how the Modern Liberal views the self- a view which, to this point, has yet to be explained. In part, this is because the Liberal

conception of the self is necessarily more open than other, more conservative views. Therefore, the Liberal conception of the self finds itself resting not in God or the Natural law, which themselves are too prescriptive, but rather, in rationality. Essentially, the Liberal conception of the self denies, or at least minimizes, the spiritual element of the human person and amplifies human rationality. Basically, it is the Natural law without its divinity. So, for the Liberal, the self is primarily a rational being. This is why a prominent Liberal thinker like John Rawls, when outlining what the self should pursue, lists things like, “rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth, and self-respect” (Hittinger 588), which are generally specific, but specifically vague. Not because Rawls could not pin down what he thought would portray the ideal life, but because someone else might, rationally, arrive at a different conclusion.

For an example of the Liberal vision outlined by this paper in action, one can return to the idea of marriage. Clearly, because the Liberal vision is based on an individual’s autonomy and their ability to come rationally to different conclusions, they cannot have as rigid a view of marriage as Conservatives. This is not to say that the Conservative view is itself irrational. Rather, it helps elucidate the point that plurality is allowed in the Liberal framework. Because of this plurality, for the Liberal, what is most important about marriage is that “entrance into it results from voluntary choice and that the division of labor within families results from fair negotiation” (Walsh 432). Any transcendent principle from which a marriage might be structured, like a divinely inspired desire to procreate and will the good of the spouse, is secondary- almost irrelevant from a social perspective. Unburdened by any religious or principle-imposed barrier, the liberal can offer marriage as a widely ranging rational engagement, meaning something like

same-sex marriage would be permitted. However, something like a traditional marriage arrangement would be permitted too, on the same rational grounds. For Liberals, the hallmarks of what society should emphasize in relation to the self are voluntarism, self-respect, and reasonable pluralism.

Wrapping up considerations of the Liberal argument for both the self and how this view is applied, it is important to note that some scholars make the assertion that the pluralism Rawls and other Liberals put forward is itself a mask for liberal assumptions of justice and the good. Basically, the argument goes that a claim that autonomy is the highest principle is itself a moral, not rational argument, and any “pluralism” that comes out of such a claim is merely an application of said morality. Exemplifying this point is Rod Dreher, who writes in response to the Liberal view of marriage, that, “The non-public, moralistic character of arguments in favor of same-sex marriage is often obscured by a rhetorical maneuver, however, which frames the debate as if it were simply about providing equal and fair access to an agreed-upon, uncontroversial social good” (Dreher 456). A closer analysis of this statement will come later, but for now, it is important only to note that some are skeptical of the Liberal theory.

The Progressive Tradition

As America has entered modernity and shifted towards a primarily “liberal” conception of the self, a third tradition regarding the self has emerged that pushes the boundary of the liberal framework. As a reminder, the liberal conception of the self emphasizes human rationality, at the expense of human spirituality. The self, then, is that which can be developed rationally. This means that the Conservative, who believes that

the God-given, hylomorphic self implies certain duties and responsibilities has a perfectly valid view of the self. However, it also means that the atheist, who rejects hylomorphism entirely and rests everything in evolutionary biology, has an equally valid understanding. Pluralism is the name of the liberal game. The Progressive tradition cuts a different, more assertive angle. From the view of this paper, the Progressive tradition, using the groundwork of a liberal conception of the self, asserts authoritatively the minority conceptions of the self that the liberal conceptions allow (but does not explicitly adopt). The work, then, is in explaining what the progressive tradition does that creates the conditions for these assertions.

Progressive Beginnings- Rousseau

To do this, like with liberalism, the intellectual roots of the Progressive tradition must be addressed. For this, one can turn to the philosophy of John-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau, the mid-18th century writer, plays a vital role in many ideological traditions. The element of his philosophy that is most important for this paper is that “For Rousseau, the individual is at his best- he is most truly himself – when he acts in accordance with his nature” (Trueman 123). At first, this might sound like the exact arguments the Conservatives make, and for the most part, it is. Rousseau believes God is who gives humanity their nature. However, Rousseau makes himself distinct by, instead of approaching “nature” from the sense of obligation, considering nature as a sort of “inner voice”. He does not believe in the Natural law. Instead, Rousseau, “replaces all natural titles to rule with one based on social contract, and all natural law or morality with the commands of the sovereign Will” (Melzer 636). In Rousseau’s framework, humanity

expresses what God has given them through an inward reflection, rather than through an external assent to a “Natural” law.

Melzer, writing further on Rousseau’s refutation of the Natural law, argues that for Rousseau, “in the original state of nature, the rational principles of natural law are not known; later, when they may be known, they are not by nature enforced” (Melzer 639). So, Rousseau not only states that humanity expresses God’s will by acting with their nature and not assenting to a Natural law, but also, he asserts that a traditionally understood natural law does not even really exist. The bulk of this refutation, as Melzer later points out, arises out of Rousseau’s description of the natural man. Instead of articulating, like Snead for example, that humanity is sociable by nature, Rousseau claims that humanity is, at base, selfish and solitary. Benjamin Storey makes this clear when he points out that, in Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, he, “describes the wholehearted, yet innocent, selfishness of natural man” (Storey 255). This is not to say that Rousseau finds humanity as being inclined too evil. Rather, it is just to say that for Rousseau, humanity does not naturally rest in society, though it is unavoidable (and even good). So, Rousseau, armed with these beliefs, rejects the schema put forward by Conservatives, even if the output he argues for is similar in nature.

If this is the case, why then is Rousseau informative of the later progressive tradition? If he just provides a self-oriented, though still God-given worldview, would not it make more sense to classify him as a complicating Conservative? The answer, resoundingly, is no. Even though Rousseau argues from God and has a definitive morality, because he focuses, “on inward psychological life” (Trueman 125), Rousseau provides a great prefiguring of the modern, progressive conception of the self. Basically,

Rousseau sets the table for how progressives view the self. Charles Taylor points this out when he writes that, considering how the modern age interprets Rousseau:

“But the definition of conscience as an inner sentiment could be taken in a much stronger sense. Not just that I have, thanks be to God, sentiments which accord with what I see through other means to be the universal good, but that the inner voice of my true sentiments define what is the good: since the elan of nature in me is the good, it is this which must be consulted to discover it (Taylor 362).

Of course, Taylor makes it clear that Rousseau himself does not subscribe to this line of thinking. Rousseau, “ran his inner voice in tandem with the traditional way of understanding and recognizing universal good” (Taylor 362), but his language allows for and helps articulate the more radical view, that being that the self creates morality and expresses it.

This view that Taylor discusses, a self-creating conception of the good that lacks God, is, in part, how the Progressive tradition views the self. More so than the liberals, who focus on a plural understanding of the self, defined by what can be rationally conceived, the Progressives imbue the self with a sort of spiritual, God-like essence, inasmuch as the interior self acts as that which defines reality. This is complicated by, for Progressives, their lack of a comprehensive doctrine that attempts to define the union of soul and body. For Conservatives, the doctrine is hylomorphism. For Liberals, the doctrine is that everyone is rational, and matters pertaining to the soul are up to individuals. For Progressives, the doctrine appraising this is much more unclear. In some respects, the Progressive tradition seems to be derivative of the Conservatives, at least on the soul side. Humanity has just replaced the origin of the soul. In other aspects,

though, the Progressive tradition mirrors the rational, body driven pluralism of the Liberals. It is not as though the Progressives force a definition like hylomorphism. Suffice it to say, the Progressive conception is difficult to pin down, and this difficulty is intentional.

Modern Progressivism

To understand this difficulty, and how best to discern through it, one can turn to the book *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity*. In this book, liberal scholars Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay discuss how Liberalism has moved away from the pluralistic ideas of the Enlightenment towards a new, progressive age. Of important note for this paper is their discussion of Postmodernism and its definition. This is because Progressivism is a postmodern derivative. One of the authors they cite, Walter Truett Anderson gives four pillars of postmodern thought. The first is, “the social construction of the concept of the self: Identity is constructed by many cultural forces and is not given to a person by tradition” (Pluckrose and Lindsay 28). From this quotation, it is clear to see where the Progressive conception of the self rejects the Conservative view in its entirety. Even if they share some commonality in application, the Progressive says that identity’s formation definitively social, and not because of some divine gift. The second is, “The Relativism of moral and ethical discourse: Morality is not found but made. That is, morality is not based on cultural or religious tradition,..., but is constructed by dialogue and choice” (Pluckrose and Lindsay 28). In this, the Progressive conception rejects modern Liberalism. Morality is constructed, yes, but nothing about said construction must be rational.

So, the Progressive tradition appears to be running in a third lane, opposite of both Conservatives and Liberals. They accept the spiritual nature of the self, but a nature that is entirely self-constructed. They also are relative, but not from any rational sense. This is because, as Pluckrose and Lindsay point out, the Progressive tradition has rejected the uniting structure that both Conservatives and Liberals possess. Think, for a moment, about how the Conservative tradition constructs its worldview. Humanity is united (in part) around the God-given Natural law, which itself encodes for humanity how to live. This Natural law is the same for every individual, regardless of race, gender, class, or creed. Similarly (though through a different lens), the Liberal tradition unites people by instructing them that they are individuals interacting with the same universal tradition in their own independent ways. The universal tradition that all three of the Atheist, Evangelical, and Muslim are the same, just with different manifestations. This is not true for the Progressive tradition. Instead, as Pluckrose and Lindsay point out, for Progressives, “the boundary between that which is objectively true and that which is subjectively experienced ceases to be accepted” (29). Essentially, the Progressive tradition merges the universal with the subjective with subjective. As Pluckrose and Lindsay so eloquently put it, “The perception of society as formed by individuals interacting with universal truths was replaced by multiple allegedly equally valid knowledges and truths” (29), creating an infinitely numbered playing field of truths. How then, without the universal, do Progressives organize these truths in a workable way?

The answer to this question lies in the animating principle of the postmodern Progressive political system: Political society is formed on power-relations. Pluckrose

and Lindsay make this clear when they write, “one central belief in postmodern political thought is that powerful forces in society essentially order society into categories and hierarchies that are organized to serve their own interests” (37). Basically, for the postmodern Progressives, what orders society is not an emphasis on conserving what is useful or what allows for reasonable disagreement. Rather, these individuals see society itself as a dangerous arrangement. Society’s institutions are “useful” only inasmuch as they serve the self-interest of the people organizing them. Reasonable disagreement, though it might seem like a good answer, only serves to make a self-serving arrangement serve more people. For the progressives, it is not enough to say that society is organized to benefit the powerful, one must also assert that these organizations are, “setting up barriers against the positions of others” (37). So, for progressives, their claim of the indefinite nature of the soul is complicated by a weariness of any established structure that organizes society, as this structure has the propensity to silence marginalizes or otherwise less powerful voices. This implies that, for the progressive, the primary goal is to deconstruct these structures to allow for more conceptions of the soul and more voice for the less powerful in society.

Applying the Conceptions

To this point, this paper has only focused on developing three different conceptions of the self: the Conservative, Liberal, and Progressive. Though this has allowed for the three different conceptions to be framed, it does little to demonstrate what practical effect these conceptions have for how a society might organize itself, other than what might be some surface level observations. To cut deeper than this and expose what might be the decision-making process for proponents of these conceptions on social

issues, one can observe how the Conservative, Liberal, and Progressive (from the conceptions put forward by this paper) view an aspect of public policy. This will allow to move these ideas from the abstract to the real, where they can more easily be assessed for their strengths and weaknesses.

No issue in modern American politics seems to highlight America's different view of the self more acutely than gender. From whom can use what public restroom, to who can compete in which sporting division, and what notions of sexuality can be taught in schools, this issue rests at the heartbeat of all three of these conceptions. This paper will not address any one specific part of gender policy. That is both impractical and redundant. Instead, it will offer a sort of "general rule" or axiom that grounds Conservative, Liberal, or Progressive thinking on the subject.

Moving in order of most to least narrow, the Conservative presents themselves first for evaluation. This is a pretty cut-and-dry process. Conservatives view the self as God-given and hylomorphic. It is fixed and unchanging around what God made them to be. So, obviously, the Conservative postulates that the self is, before a person is even born, established. A man is born a man. His body informs this view. His *essence* informs this view. This should not at all be revelatory. What, though, is worth exploring is what the Conservative views around this assertion, because this is much more important to how a Conservative notion of the self shapes public policy. Remember that, for the Conservative, what is important is enshrining what they see as essential in facilitating their "Anthropology of Embodiment", that which best facilitates a willful gift and receipt. This paper has viewed this claim exclusively positively, specifically when it discussed how the Conservative, in society, would seek for the traditional understanding of

marriage to be enshrined and protected in public life. However, the Conservative view carries with it a heavy dose of exclusion as well. What glorifies and lifts the self cannot, from the Conservative, be everything- especially if it cuts against fundamentals of the Conservative worldview. Therefore, a conservative writer like Rod Dreher (previously cited) can state, emphatically, that “Transgenderism must be eradicated. It must be wiped out, scrubbed, banished from the mouths of civilized people, confined to the tiny moment in history for which it seemed ascendant, cast once and for all back to the fire from which it came” (Dreher). Transgenderism, which posits that the soul/essence/spirit of an individual can transcend their given body and become something other than it, is a direct contradiction to the Conservative vision of the self. This means that, where things that glorify the Conservative vision should be conserved, things, like transgenderism, that distort the Conservative vision of the self should be excluded. Not because Conservatives are mean and intolerant, but because they cannot compromise on their first principle.

This rigidity on gender is not something the Liberal conception of the self shares with the Conservative. This is because, for the Liberal, the fundamental principle upon which these gender issues are decided is not the God-given nature of the self, but rather the ability of individuals to behave soundly as rational actors. Therefore, the Liberal, when confronted with the largely Conservative argument that, “legalizing Gay marriage is a slippery slope” can respond by saying that “gay marriage is different from other types of marriage such as polygamy, incestuous marriages, and under-age marriages in a legally relevant way: there is no foreseeable harm in allowing gay marriage, whereas polygamy and incestuous marriage arguably harm the interests of society” (Held 226). Rationally,

from the Liberal perspective, gay marriage at least makes sense. Someone, at birth, is born attracted to a person of the same sex. They live as good and virtuous life as possible with that attraction. This is because, as a matter of policy (and stated previously), Liberals view liberty as how best a person can express their rationally constructed view of life. Jacob Held makes this clear when he writes that, “This notion of liberty, the claim that liberty is freedom from encroachment, and one possesses the right to self-determination so long as she harms no one is a founding principle of American democracy” (Held 227). So, for Liberals, so long as one’s choices on gender do not harm others, then, reasonably, their right to make that choice should not be infringed.

Characterizing the postmodern Progressive view on gender issues is a bit more difficult as this view rests on the fact that notions of sex and gender are purely social constructs which the progressive seeks to resist. In *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, writers Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan make this clear when they write, “The individual status and position of those we group together and call ‘women’ and of those we call ‘men’ are argued to vary so greatly over time, space and culture that there is little justification for the use of these collective nouns” (9). So, for Progressives, it is not accurate to say that “traditional” notions of men and women, or marriage, or gender are inaccurate. Rather it is to say that collectivizing them at all is folly. Instead, to understand gender, one must, “focus on one’s *standpoint*- that is, one’s identity” (Pluckrose and Lindsay 138). More importantly, one must focus on the validity of such a standpoint. Postmodern Progressivism asserts radically the inverse of the Conservatives. Instead of rigidly clinging to a fixed conception of the self and advocating for policy from that perspective, Progressives argue from the conception that the self is essentially

variable, and this fact should be amplified. Where Conservatives say, “man and woman are the only two categories, they are given at conception, and society should order itself accordingly”, the Progressive shouts, “people are people with constantly evolving identities. To sequester them into categories would be to limit their freedom to be who they are becoming”. Progressivism presents on gender a radical openness, the merits of which will now be evaluated.

Critiquing these views on gender, it is wise to consider them as though they are on a sort of number line. On one end, the far left, is Conservatism. In the middle, is Liberalism. On the far right, is Progressivism. Conservative, occupying its far-left position on the number line, is high in order, and low in individual expression. What does that mean? Quite simply, it is to say that the Conservative notion of the self and liberty on gender presents a structure that is easily ordered (men and women made at conception, with a fundamental and unchanged nature), but limited in expression. Men and women can behave differently, sure. After all, Conservatives do not claim that all men and all women are the same. However, they, at root, must express that nature that is written on their very soul, and they cannot digress from this. Therefore, though the Conservative portrays a much clearer vision in gender, and what this means for what people are allowed to do, this clear vision creates a great deal of exclusion.

This exclusion is what the Liberal view of the self as it relates to gender tries to remedy. Instead of going as far as the Conservative and proffering a cohesive vision of the self and how this fits into gender, the Liberal stops at rationality. They focus much more on what can reasonably be permitted. Liberty is not freedom to do what one ought (Conservatism), but instead freedom to do what one determines, so long as this view does

not inhibit other individual's determinations. So, for Liberals, they have some semblance of order- that being rationality-, but also some freedom for expression because that order is less binding. It occupies a sort of middle ground. However, the Liberal is still against some more radical gender claims. Consider the previous discussion of liberal argument for gay marriage. It rests on the idea that people are born how they are born. A man is born attracted to a man. That is his nature, and he behaves rationally in accordance with it. This is contradicted by the claim made by transgenderism, for example, which states that what (if anything) is given to a person at birth is wholly irrelevant when compared to the ideology that person socially constructs. A person born as a male who is attracted to men could just as easily be a woman with an attraction to men, from this perspective. Obviously, this contradiction is something that Liberalism rejects because it creates an untenable plurality of contradictions.

This is where postmodern progressivism enters the discourse. Where the Conservative articulates a clear vision of who the self is, and holds fast to this, and the Liberal articulates a clear reliance of the self on rationality, the Progressive articulates the importance of the self as its own determiner. This clearly dismantles any sort of prescriptive order put forth by either Conservatives or Liberals, but it also allows for an acutely subjective expression of the self which some might see as a chief end. No one, in Progressivism, is cast away (other than those who articulate any fixed vision of the self). This, in some respects, is very valuable. Every viewpoint has a voice, and an equal claim to legitimacy. However, people are also left to their own devices, which might lead to some trepidatious places. Order and structure are lost in the liberal framework in order to raise exponentially the available level of individual expression.

Conclusions

All of this is to say that, in American thought, conceptions of the self have shifted greatly from where it started. The founders operated exclusively from the framework of the Natural law. They founded America in this schema with the notion that man could discern what he was supposed to do from the law endowed to him by God in nature. In modernity, this position has been echoed, though not verbatim, by Conservatives, who use this reasoning as the basis for their “Anthropology of Embodiment”. Modern Liberals, inspired by the founders’ reliance on the Natural law but skeptical of any God-given framework, developed a theory of reasonable, rational disagreement, wherein people from different walks of life could approach the same universal goals: happiness, prosperity, etc., so long as they could do it without hurting one another. Postmodern progressives, taken with the idea of difference, developed a theory of intense personal subjectivity that amplified the Modern Liberals interest in different people coexisting, while also flattening institutional barriers for marginalized means of expression. From this, it is clear to see that as America has gotten older and developed new understandings of the self, liberty has become less about order and more about freedom, as shown by how America has gotten from its Natural law beginnings to its contemporary postmodern Progressivism.

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