Must Liberalism be Atomistic?

by Jacob Rodriguez

During his inauguration ceremony, the newly elected mayor of New York City Zohran Mamdani pledged to run the city as he had run his campaign, as a committed socialist. He stirred much discussion during his speech when he claimed that "We will replace the frigidity of rugged individualism with the warmth of collectivism."[26] A variety of public thinkers and politicians commented on this statement, taking it as a moment to reflect on what they perceived as a referendum on uniquely American ideals.

That a kind of "rugged individualism" is characteristic of American virtues and guiding ideals is difficult to deny. Americans have prided themselves on a tradition of liberty and hard-won independence, one which is evident in the bravery and foresight of the Founders and finds examples in

[26] News, Fox. "Bishop Robert Barron Slams Zohran Mamdani's 'warmth of Collectivism' Line: 'For God's Sake.'" New York *Post*, January 2, 2026.

the independent colonialists and pioneers who tamed the American wilderness. The pertinent question in our own time is whether or not such a "rugged individualism" was ever a good thing, and whether Americans should hold on to their individualism or dispose of it. Zohran Mamdani's election and very public statement in opposition to individualism is evidence of just how much liberal notions have come into question for young men and women in America.

Many will find Mamdani's commitment to socialism an insufficient response to the ills allegedly brought by individualism, even if they agree it is a cold ideal for public life. But the defenders of liberalism must reckon with the way in which much of the country perceives the liberal ideas of the Founding, ideals which have guided much of American life. They must also square with the accusation from critics of liberalism that ideals like individualism, or "value-neutral" politics, are the very cause of the myriad social ills which currently plague America and other western countries. Social isolation, a lack of experienced meaning, a hopelessness about one's economic or social future, difficulties in romantic relationships, declining religiosity: these problems are frequently

laid at the feet of liberal principles whose critics interpret them as atomistic. Charging individualism with being socially isolating and community-shredding ("frigid" in Mamdani's term) is not a new critique. Perhaps liberalism's most popular intellectual critic is Patrick Deneen, whose 2018 book *Why Liberalism Failed* provides a very clear and explicit account of why the social and political ills plaguing America are a result of the success of liberalism.[27] According to Deneen the principles of liberal thought are socially corroding, and succeed only insofar as they sit atop deeper and more substantial communal structures. But liberalism's ultimate success is in displacing the very institutions, traditions, and communities which made its ideals viable for a time. Modern America sits in the ruin of liberal success, its institutions and culture scoured, and the way out of our morass is to reject liberal principles, not least a kind of individualism.

While Deneen identifies a number of changes and ideas which bring about our current ills, his critique of liberalism as presuming a kind of "anthropological individualism," a key element in

[27] Deneen, Patrick J. *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

his account, is prefigured by another great thinker considering the problems of modernity: the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Deneen and Taylor's accounts of liberalism dovetail in certain ways, as Taylor also takes much of liberal thought to be "atomistic," that is, allowing for a radical autonomy and self-sufficiency which in turn produces an inability to maintain social obligations or meaningful relationships.[28] For Taylor and Deneen, the independence, self-mastery, and competence which characterizes "individualism" for most Americans cannot be divorced from the deleterious effects such a view has upon our social mores. They also both identify the same villain in their accounts of liberalism: John Locke, the 17th century Christian physician and philosopher whose political philosophy is the foundation of modern liberal thought. Locke's account of the self and personal identity, on Taylor's view, produces an atomized, autonomous individual. The result are a variety of social ills, the sort which prefigure the many problems in American life which Deneen lays at the feet of modern liberalism. While both Deneen and Taylor would note immediately that many other

[28] Taylor, Charles. "Atomism." Essay in *Communitarianism and Individualism*, edited by Shlomo Avineri and Avner De-Shalit, 29–50. Oxford University Press, 2011.

thinkers and historical events are needed before one arrives at the problems of the present day, the seed of our social and political dysfunction lies primarily with Locke, the father of liberalism.

Many readers will find themselves sympathetic to the problems which both Deneen, and Taylor before him, were attempting to diagnose and solve. Some will be skeptical of many ideas which go under the banner of liberalism in modern life, and have critiqued Deneen for conflating classical liberalism with progressive liberalism. As Deneen himself notes, this response does not answer the core critique which he provides: that it is liberal ideas from the start which produce the ground for the issues of the day. Classical liberalism inevitably produces progressive liberalism. Though some will be sympathetic to Deneen's charges, they will also be rightly skeptical of eliminating characteristically liberal notions in pursuit of a more cohesive social structure. Should we eliminate a robust definition of the freedom of speech, or other natural or civil rights in pursuit of deeper community? Deneen's alternative prescriptions for our political state deserve a fair and serious evaluation: he is clear that we cannot, nor should we, foist off all the benefits of liberalism, and has developed a more detailed

account of the alternatives to liberalism in later works. What I want to consider instead is the possibility that the ground of our liberal polity, the notion of the self and the modern view of human nature as both Deneen and Taylor see it, is not so bleak a starting point as it may seem. If it is the case that early liberal, specifically Lockean notions of the self are not of necessity atomistic, then this is evidence that the ills of modern or progressive liberalism are either not the result of this view of the self, or are not endemic to it and can be corrected. If this is the case, the restructuring of our social and political life need not be done through a wholesale reorientation of our founding virtues and political life away from liberalism, but could instead be done through the hard work of individuals rebuilding their social institutions and cultural mores, work which will ultimately require the independence and foresight individualism provides, properly understood. We'll find that Locke's view of the self is not so radically anti-social. Rather, it provides a unique capacity for individual action and reflection while still retaining the kinds of moral obligations and connections which Deneen and Taylor think are essential to a culture deeper than our contemporary liberal polity.

The idea that liberalism must of necessity be atomistic or socially destructive is not an intuitive notion. Why must the characteristic ideals of classical liberalism–equality, limited government, and individual rights–become a solvent for traditional cultures? Does the recognition of one's equality before others not provide a means in which to relate well to them, and foster obvious pro-social moral ideals within a community, such as that each person should be treated with a minimum of respect? Does a concern for one's own rights not produce a commensurate and practical respect for other's rights, what Robert Nozick means when he speaks of individual rights as "side-constraints"?

Critics of liberalism argue that the universalism of liberal moral principles imposes a kind of social hegemony upon particular cultures; what were functional, ancient, and accepted traditions and institutional practices suddenly come under pressure in liberal thought insofar as they violate the universal principles of individual rights or equality. Marriage and relationships between the sexes is an obvious example. While many would suggest that patriarchal structures are inherently sexist, violent, or repressive, a more sophisticated critique of liberalism notes how traditional forms of marriage

produced social harmony and protected, rather than imposed upon women (and do so without claiming such traditional structures were perfect). Deneen mentions in his own critiques of Locke on marriage how Christianity introduces an even greater degree of liberty by reordering this patriarchal structure into a system where the primary focus in marriage is the uniting of consenting adults on the basis of sacrificial love. With the arrival of liberalism, however, marriage becomes less a uniting of families and communities, or the ordering of men and women under a Christian sacrament, and instead becomes a contractual engagement between two equal but distinctive persons. This is an agreement which concerns them as individuals, and does not involve the broader community or any religious institution unless they choose so.

But how does liberalism as a plausible framework for social and political order come about? With particular persons and whole communities set in traditional cultures, how does the notion that one is entitled to a battery of rights and to a government of universal principles arise? The transformation from traditional to liberal cultures occurs in a transformation of our ideas about individual persons, in our understanding of the self as already

mentioned. Deneen is explicit that this critique of the liberal notion of the self underlies his account of liberalism's failings: voluntarism, the unfettered choice of individuals, is the first and most characteristic intellectual revolution which precedes and comes to embody liberalism.[29] Deneen further explains how liberalism is composed of two basic ideas which are crucial to the moral and political account which follows: the first is anthropological individualism (from which follows the voluntarist conception of choice). Persons are by nature individuals, and their ontological independence avails them of free choice. This individualism and capacity for free choice distinguishes all persons from their environment, and so sets them against nature rather than as part of it. Consequently the second notion follows from the first: that liberalism is defined by its opposition to *nature* as such. Liberalism, in partitioning individuals from their surroundings, sets individuals at war with nature. Consequently, Deneen identifies the liberal notion of the self as "by nature, nonrelational creatures, separate and autonomous."[30]

[29] Deneen, 31.
[30] Deneen, 32.

The political ramifications of this view are first set out in Locke's own works, and so by his influence is the liberal notion of the self given purchase in our social and political ideas. The contractarian form of the liberal state, which Locke establishes and where free individuals in the state of nature must consent to their form of government, presupposes such an anthropological individualism. Moreover, the liberal notion of liberty as merely a lack of incumbrance to one's action, rather than as the control of hedonistic desire (what some would frame as negative vs. positive liberties), produces a state where the moral or practical demands of communities and institutions become simple limitations. According to Deneen, the expansion of autonomous liberty for individuals beyond their communities produces a paradoxical need for larger and larger government. The end result is expansive progressive government, radically atomized individuals, and frayed social institutions.

In this way Deneen follows Taylor's identification of the self as the source of changes in Enlightenment thought which produce liberalism. Taylor has catalogued the transformation of western political culture through several works, the most relevant being *Sources of the Self*, which (to overly

simplify a complex text) explains how western thought comes to over time alter its presumptions about the nature of the self, with a variety of consequences. In Taylor's account, our modern notion of the self is a moral category, framed within a specific ethical outlook, and filled by the content of one's culture, traditions, and relationships. To be a self is to be a moral being of some kind.

The most radical source of change in the account of the self occurs, of course, with Locke, to whom Taylor devotes a chapter and several subsequent sections in *Sources of the Self.* According to Taylor, Locke sets forth a vision of human nature as a "punctual self."[31] Individuals have the capacity to disengage from their embodied experience and reflect upon those elements in an abstract, evaluative manner. Our capacity for abstraction, a key element of Locke's definition of the self in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, is not merely a reflective capacity but one which distinguishes us from our time and place. While this would not be so different from thinkers like Descartes, this rationalist capacity is combined with

[31] Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, 159-176.

Locke's mechanistic view of the universe; through the burgeoning physical science Taylor argues that Locke cuts out any need for Christian teleology guiding the natural world. A providentially ordered nature gives way to a free field of action, containing the otherwise untrammeled Lockean self. This in combination with his critique of innate ideas produces an individual who is radically autonomous, and who in some degree produces his own reality through abstraction and who is fundamentally unmoored from his surroundings. One can see very clearly how this account of the self gives even deeper character to Deneen's notion of "anthropological individualism."

This description of the Lockean self happens to almost perfectly fill Taylor's account of the atomist view of the individual, which he describes in a famous essay titled "Atomism." The atomistic view of the self is of one who is self-sufficient in his or her own existence. This view of the self immediately implies a group of related political assumptions, the most essential of which is individual rights. But Taylor argues that this leads to irreversible contradictions in liberal thought. The primacy of individual rights for the atomist view of the self implies attendant moral obligations upon

each rights-bearer. These are quite plausible obligations, such as that one ought to fulfill the capacities within one's rights to the best of one's abilities, or that one ought not to impede the exercise of other's rights. But if it's the case that one could not fulfill such obligations under the ontological presumptions of liberalism, then the view of the self which animates or provides the foundation for liberalism collapses. That is, under the assumptions of atomism or "anthropological individualism," if one could not practice the moral obligations which necessarily follow from this view of the self, then it would be rendered inconsistent. The primacy of autonomy, and of the individual rights which follow it, could not be borne out in practice.

Taylor argues that just this is the case: the kinds of values which the atomist wishes to see preserved and practiced in society only occur in a distinctly communal society, not in an atomistic one. The view of the self which underlies Lockean liberalism is false, or insufficient, for it cannot produce the kind of society which it presupposes or needs to exist in order for liberal practices to flourish. At the same time that it alienates individuals from their communal obligations, liberalism relies upon such

obligations to bring about individual selves with the proper capacities and values. Liberalism is unable to perpetuate itself in such a context.

Such a view seems to track quite well with Deneen's account of the origins of liberalism. A value-neutral or progressive presumption in liberal thought is parasitic or dependent upon a culture or society which already bears a set of values and presumptions. But as such a value-neutral liberalism wins out over a culture, it slowly corrodes cultural values and institutions, divorcing people from the obligations, communities, manners, and laws which made liberty and rights-bearing plausible. The result is the current state of affairs in America, and much of the western world.

Responding to critiques of liberalism as atomistic or corrosive to communal connections, therefore, requires that we consider the view of the self which underlies the presumed changes in modern life. Continuing to defend liberalism from these charges from a value-neutral, Rawlsian perspective is certainly possible, but postliberal critics are unlikely to accept these insofar as such attempts will simply placate or dismiss the concern for seeing moral goods achieved in the political space. Moreover, it

seems increasingly likely that such a value-neutral presumption does in fact imply the contradictions suggested by Taylor. It is difficult to reconcile notions of individual worth, and the rights attendant to them, within a wholly neutral political space. The solution is not to abandon the liberal notion of the self, however. The problem with both Taylor and Deneen's interpretation is quite simple: Locke's view of the self does not contain such value-neutral presumptions, nor must it leave us in a state of radical autonomy which is socially destructive. Far from shredding at one's communal or institutional connections, Locke shows a great degree of concern and interest for communities and the ethics which they produce. His vision of the self is commensurate with this. In Locke's account of personal identity and the self, he gives us a realistic sense of the self as freely choosing, profoundly creative, partially self-forming, and yet radically limited by one's knowledge and context, as well as constituted by its very nature with a moral orientation. Insofar as his view of the self is the ground for much of modern or liberal thought (and Taylor certainly argues this is the case), then referring back to his notion of the self is both

plausible and productive in considering alternative routes for contemporary liberalism.

Both Taylor and Deneen are at pains to note how an atomistic conception of the self is ignorant of the manner in which individuals are formed by their communities, what Deneen describes as the "givenness" of reality which he suggests liberalism militates against. The liberal self presumes that individuals are autonomous and independent of their social sphere. This is not true of Locke, who was deeply interested in the burgeoning anthropological studies occurring in his time and read much about the structure of tribal communities and the origin of their political orders. Locke, though he identifies the self as independent, reasoning, and capable of abstraction, makes extensive notes in his journal from his studies of the Bible and Native American tribes, observing how individual persons are by nature social. The formative effects of tradition and custom are powerful and shape the moral frame wherein people live. Because of the often ill effects of social formations, where kings or patriarchs have limitless authority and reason is often triumphed over, Locke says we eventually begin to develop checks upon power in a social context, specifically upon political

leaders. These checks on political power are social and communal developments before they are distinct philosophies.[32]

This quasi-independence takes on a normative significance for Locke; our status as ontologically distinct individuals, who are both formed by our social interactions but yet defined by our capacity to reason independently, means that we are the types of creatures who can question our own social-political state. This capacity is then heavily influenced by Locke's view of natural law. In his *Essays on the Laws of Nature*, early texts produced by Locke prior to the *Two Treatises*, Locke takes our rational capacities as implying moral obligations for individuals capable of discerning a natural law. The dictates of that law which Locke highlights are profoundly pro-social. Locke identifies three general precepts which the natural law provides for; to preserve oneself, to know and worship God, and "to enter into society by a certain propensity of nature, and to be prepared for the maintenance of society by the gift of speech and through the intercourse of language, in fact as much

[32] Grant, Ruth W. "Locke's Political Anthropology and Lockean Individualism." *The Journal of Politics* 50, no. 1 (1988): 42–63.

as he is obliged to preserve himself."[33] Maintenance of society is a moral dictate, one which applies to each person just as much as it applies to himself.

The specific requirements of societal maintenance, in Locke's account, are also quite clear: These include explicit obligations like the affection towards parents, caring for your neighbor, relieving those who are in trouble, and feeding the hungry. Note that none of these are freely chosen by the individual; obligations on Lockean liberalism do not come merely by way of contractual agreements by freely choosing, unbound individuals. These precepts are "outward" performances which are demanded of us in circumstances we invariably find ourselves in.

These pro-social moral demands do not occur randomly, for Locke is not an anti-teleological thinker as Taylor would suggest. Other scholars have noted Locke's frequent Christian appeals to purpose and design in the natural world and human nature. Taylor's suggestion that Locke's rejection of innate ideas is anti-teleological falls flat once one realizes that Locke does not accept a blank-slate

[33] Locke, John, and W. von Leyden. *Essays on The Law of Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002, 157-9.

view of the mind; the mind is furnished with reason, sense perception, and a variety of latent capacities which God has placed in us to perceive His design and will. "Men have Reason," says Locke, "to be well satisfied with what God hath thought fit for them, since he hath given them…Whatsoever is necessary for the Conveniences of Life and Information of Vertue…"[34] The Lockean self, therefore, sits in a distinctive position as a moral agent. According to Locke in the *Essay*, the self is a "forensic" being, that is, a moral and legal being with capacities for consciousness, reflection, and abstraction which make one independent but morally obligated. The self is a "legal" being with respect to the laws which God establishes, whether those are revelatory or natural. The result is a view of the self who can freely recognize the moral dictates of the natural law, but which is inhibited by one's own limitations in knowledge and social context. These moral demands and limits in knowledge combine to place limits upon the appropriate powers of government in Locke's account.

[34] Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, 45.

Much more could be said in responding to the critique of liberalism as atomistic, or in fleshing out Locke's account of the self. One would have to show, in greater detail, why the independence which Locke identifies with the self does not in practice lead to atomization in order to respond to Deneen's critiques fully. Recognizing that the origin of the modern self is not rigidly autonomous or anti-social, however, gives us a means to consider Deneen's goal of reorienting ourselves from the damaging elements of liberal thought without casting off the moral progress made in the modern era. While the account of a modern or Lockean self would require a full explanation of the degree to which one is bound by natural law, and at liberty through one's rational capacities, that something like the Lockean view of the self is impossible to throw off is clearly the case. Are not Deneen or thinkers like him evidence of selves who have the capacity to reason and reflect over and above their own culture, evaluating both its benefits and drawbacks on the basis of a higher moral authority? Deneen argues that in attempting to remove ourselves from the grip of liberalism, we will need to reorient ourselves towards the careful cultivation of small communities, fostering the genuine connectedness

which is eroded by liberalism. But the capacity to form, develop, and meaningfully participate in such communities within the context of a broader liberal society, or to change that broader society into something else entirely, will require the kind of individuals which Locke suggests. That such a crucial account of the self in the modern age does not forgo meaningful obligations and communality shows that one may still be able to correct the worst excesses of liberalism, while retaining its virtues.

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