

The pursuit of personal freedom has meant the trashing of tradition and a consequent all-consuming present

# Autonomy on the Road to Tyranny

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Richard M. Reinsch II

Tradition is how a people shapes its destiny in a fallen world. But talking about tradition is strange in a country composed of citizens who left—or whose ancestors escaped—nations whose traditions kept them from being all they could be. The fullest part of our tradition might be emancipation itself.

This made America a country capable of being the vehicle for a providential democratic progress toward individual equality. But equality is both easy and dangerous for its tendency to attenuate the distinctiveness of particular persons. In contrast, it is liberty that needs an apprenticeship and a defense by more thoughtful denizens.

We live in abundance amid unheralded opportunities for most Americans. But things that should be solid seem to teeter uncomfortably atop creaking foundations. Is there a coherent American citizenship that emerges from a collective memory? Is the lack of any unifying tradition at the heart of

our inability to sustain a constitutional consensus that would guide disagreement about political means and ends? Maybe that's just it: a constitutional tradition isn't something you have to articulate—you feel it in your hips, as Willmoore Kendall once said. But when it goes, can you get it back?

Even our Constitution itself would seem to be a document wholly formed and agreed to by consenting citizens concerned only with the all-consuming present. We come to realize that its deeper truths—its political traditions—unfold over time into a political and social order of autonomous adults who leave behind the premodern authority of relational

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institutions that grew out of a thick web of largely unchosen obligations. So on one powerful reading, our tradition, to the extent Americans have such a thing, would be made up of self-chosen entities and their practices, all equipped with easy exit ramps should the need to leave any commitment arise.

### *The politics of identities*

Progressives have carpet-bombed our politics with the proposition that personal identities are the source and summit of our citizenship. And these identities are, most prominently, caught up with sexuality and race, such that American citizens are not particular individuals participating in republican self-government. They are rather the products of autonomously willed assertions (call me Caitlyn), or else members of a race that provides a set of ready-made beliefs, attitudes, and opinions to adopt.

With regard to gender, the argument made by the LGBTQ coalition could only emerge in a social order that has been radically shaped by a democratic leveling ethos, one that leads individuals to nod at the assertion that I can remake myself at will. Tocqueville would have understood this in terms of an individualism that refuses to recognize any standards of virtue that might direct the democratic will. This volitional understanding of freedom pulsates among the Americans who, Tocqueville says, everywhere emulate Descartes's philosophy without having actually read his words. Members of a democratic society find in the very exercise of their will proof of its veracity, merely because it's their own.

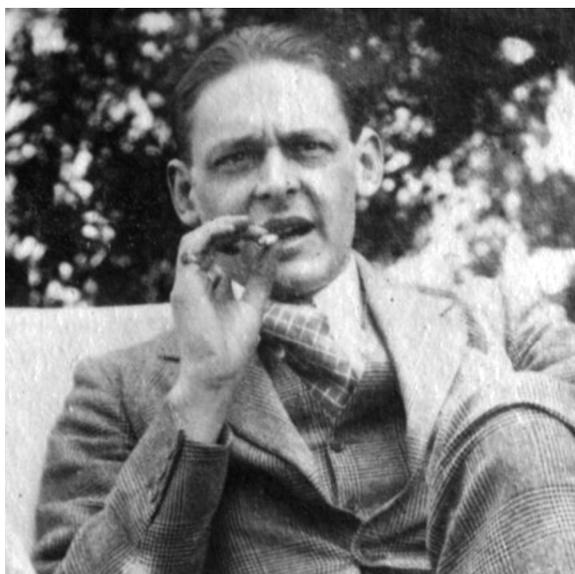
Identity and dignity are both at stake in the claims made on behalf of gender and its unlimited manifestations. But does liberty rest in what amounts to Cartesianism on crack, a liberty unable to make sense of the body save for its instrumental uses to the

inner, autonomous, willing agent? Give me dignity or give me death, progressives say; but I'll settle for the embodied human person who knows that he or she is an acting composite of soul and body that discloses purposes and goods to pursue.

Similarly, this notion of dignity has contributed to the weaponization of race that we now see on campuses, where, for example, white students at Scripps College were denied use of the coffee bar for designated periods in order to help them understand their "white privilege." Readers might think such conduct would be illegal, but the frown you see will only be your own. Dignity is immune to discursive reasoning, and its assertion is a willful act that succeeds when words are tools to enforce meaning rather than to understand reality and nature.

We have it on the incontrovertible authority of Justice Anthony Kennedy that "the Constitution promises liberty to all within its reach, a liberty that includes certain specific rights that allow persons, within a lawful realm, to define and express their identity." Kennedy has thundered that the term "liberty" in the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment is now synonymous with autonomy, which is realized by choice and identity creation, the dignity of which must be recognized and affirmed at the point of law.

If our politics is just the legal vehicle for enforcing the indefinite extension of pronouns and racial identities, we might wonder how politically durable such identities really are. Might a politics of identities produce something vastly different from the intentions of the progressive smart set? If postmodern democratic society has made everything a series of constructed choices, we shouldn't be surprised when preliberal choices reemerge as the most decisive choices of all. The first manifestation of this can be seen in the civic nationalism of Donald Trump and



*T. S. Eliot warned that the administrative class and its contempt for tradition spelled the doom of culture*

the decision by the United Kingdom to exit the European Union. Identities for most of us are caught up in family, religion, communities, and shared political history, to name a few markers that stand out. The politics of identities will surely engage these forms of belonging over and above those proclaimed by progressive intellectuals. We may wonder if a postliberal future will perhaps issue in a period that speaks with greater clarity to the reality of human nature.

### *A tradition of liberty*

Liberty, though, is our first concern as Americans. But liberty, Edmund Burke counsels in his “Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies,” must inhere “in some sensible object; and every nation has formed to itself some favourite point, which... becomes the criterion of their happiness.”

The colonists, Burke observes, took after the English constitutional tradition and found liberty in being their own self-governing masters, especially in matters of taxation.

The colonial assemblies provided the colonists with regular practice in self-government. And the dissolution of many of those assemblies by the British served to raise colonial ire against the mother country.

Though self-government and control over their money were foundational for the colonists, Burke traces the spirit and energy of their protests to religion. The colonists practiced a faith that is “the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the protestant religion” that provided to the variety of denominations “the communion of the spirit of liberty.” The religion of the colonists was built upon liberty, and its consequences for government weighed against submission of any kind.

Building on such dissidence meant the study of the law, for it was lawyers, Burke judges, who filled their assemblies and added prestige to the workings of government. With the colonists, law was something shaped by representatives of small communities, both in assemblies and in common-law suits. Law was not centralized and detached from the people, but rather a living tradition of liberty and order.

Contained in this speech are the elements that compose our greatness, for the limited government of our constitutionalism, the calibrated suspicion of power, and the still pulsating energies of our religious faiths permit our decentralized excellence to manifest itself. But how have they fared?

The sensible thing liberty now inheres in, we are told, is the technique of administration, which is to say we have a liberty that is created and perfected by a remote class of specialists. The technique of administration is part and parcel of what Edward Shils underscored in his neglected book *Tradition* about the nature of modern order. It defines itself by a “titanic and deliberate effort to undo by technology, rationality, and government the givenness of what came down from the past.” Government officials, scientists, technologists, and psychologists seek to “annul the influence” of what has been inherited.

But they have a problem. Shils remarked that a society “exists only through time,” ensuring that cutting away the past “is as disordering to the individual and to the society as being cut off in the present.” “The innovators” forget this temporal dimension of order, as do their cousins who would make gender, race, or class the essence of a society. A similar mistake is made by those who argue that “wholly emancipated individuals” should be the direct concern of society, with the “fulfillment” of “individuality” the end to which government should be aimed. Shils does not dismiss calls for new rights to be afforded minorities or to make changes that arise from new expectations in society, but what is proscribed is the progressive ideological mentality that believes that the past and present should be sacrificed for a future composed of group rights and autonomous individuals.

The understanding of tradition affirmed by Shils is the existence of beliefs and practices that have been distilled by human

experience within particular communities, shaping the meaning and stature of a people. For this reason alone, tradition should be afforded great consideration against reforms that might need to be made. Shils’s arguments on the modern ideological diminution of tradition call for deeper reflections on the technique of administration.

### *A culture of rational administration*

T. S. Eliot describes in his 1948 essay *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* the rise of a system of administrators who set rational standards in industry, education, careers, government, even the arts, thereby displacing the traditional class order with all its virtues and vices. While directly concerned with British social order, Eliot’s thoughts apply to modern technical society as a whole. Significantly for Eliot, the humanities, the arts, religion, language, and humane education, which were previously kept in one conversation formed by a perennial store of symbols, myths, stories, doctrines, and embedded meaning, are now rationally separated under the guise of instruction, equality, and a secularizing mentality. This separation of the elements of culture and religion takes meaning and purpose from a social order and liberates its politics from unwritten constraints. This secularizing mentality is a series of negations, Eliot observes, meant to provide energy after the old religion has been cut off.

In former times, the keepers of culture were not speaking to the people at large in their humane pursuits but provided the parameters of order in which graduated levels of cultural participation could take place. Only in this traditional society can a democracy serve the ethical ends of the human person. This is possible because each class is recognized as having its own “peculiar and essential function.” There is an

inherent goodness in the order of a “continuous gradation of cultural levels” among the classes. The aristocratic set isn’t necessarily of supreme importance, and it should be seen not as having “more culture than the lower, but as representing a more conscious culture and a greater specialization of culture.” To egalitarian objections, Eliot responds that equal responsibility would be loathsome for the social order, as the more deliberate and thoughtful members would be strait-jacketed, and those further removed from cultural concerns would be irresponsible in their contributions. There is no way around hierarchy, ultimately. But what kind of hierarchy will we have?

Such stewardship of culture is not manufactured but is the product of a variety of pursuits, each undertaken for its inherent goodness and not with a view to remaking society from the top down according to an abstract template. Eliot notes the centrality of the family to the succession of culture in this traditional class society. In language similar to Burke’s, Eliot evokes an organic order that receives the past before taking thought as to what will be added: “I have in mind a bond which embraces a longer period of time . . . a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote. Unless this reverence for past and future is cultivated in the home, it can never be more than a verbal convention in the community.”

Eliot argues that culture must be handed down and that this reception is the most important thing in building a home for the unborn, for it provides a repository of experiences that are in time but also timeless, and that have been sanctified by a common history and destiny of a people. The motives provided by such piety are what drive its members to maintain it. On an existential note, love for the living tradition of one’s culture and the ballast it establishes lead the members of that culture to reproduce.

To reject the past, doubt everything, and affirm nothing save for a constructed future, or to forbid forbidding in the manner of a postmodern theorist, negates the very idea of an inheritance. It ends in sterility, a fact understood by the vast majority of Western nations struggling with below-replacement birth rates.

Administrative theory dissolves this culture, notes Eliot. The previous class of custodians are purged by what amounts to a new class of managers. But this elite must form its own standards to maintain its rule. What will be their standards, and what will this group share in common with the country it rules?

Eliot argues that they will have no culture and will only share with one another the technique of management, i.e., the committee meetings whereby they dominate a society. They feel no sense of duty or gratitude to the larger body they rule. This is not limited to politics, Eliot observes, but operates in all manner of pursuits and undertakings. The elite assumes the essential malleability of society, which can be shaped by theory without concern for history or culture or actual existing people.

We can accept standardization and a certain amount of machinery ruling us, Eliot thought, for a limited time and a definite purpose: wars, catastrophes, etc. But elites will try to keep the levers of power in their hands. How? Having achieved their status on the basis of examinations, educational attainment, and ideology, it stands to reason that these experts, united only by their functions, will find ways to make their position permanent. So they will come to govern inscrutably, striking down challengers as enemies of Progress, the people, and change. Those refusing to wear the veil of scientific morality are accused because they might see the actual work being done: the separation of man’s deepest longings from the resources that might answer them.

*After administration*

What am I? What should I do? Such questions are now disposed of by consulting the appropriate educator-therapist-expert, a process that removes persons from their own experiences. Walker Percy argues in his essay “The Loss of the Creature” that in this transfer of sovereignty to the expert we witness the spoliation of things because everything is known and disposed by theory. The rational expert, then, perpetuates power by use of scientific language that conceals reality through general theories that make man a dutiful subject eager to please. On this point, Percy observes that the fault is not attributable to science but to the belief that only science can explain man’s experiences to himself. Thus the insights of premodern philosophy and religion with its storehouse of meaning for human life are replaced by scientism as an “all-encompassing world view.”

An example provided by Percy of how authentic knowing is lost in the theorist-dominated system is a comparison of who would be more likely to grasp Shakespeare’s sonnets: a Harvard freshman in a literature course or a citizen in Huxley’s *Brave New World* who happens upon a copy for the first time and immediately begins to read? Our undergraduate must surmount so much institutional packaging, so much theorizing, before an engagement with the text can occur. For Percy, within modern technical society the individual must fight to reclaim his sovereignty over his thoughts, learning, experiences, even moods, as we are now told to medicate our disturbances rather than to see them as signs requiring understanding, wisdom, contemplation, and prayer.

Stripping away this pretense of power is what the denizen of Huxley’s world achieves: alone and unafraid, he becomes a seeker of the truth. And it is the seeker that science on its own terms can’t account for and eliminate. Science rather can only describe man

in general terms as an organism within his environment. Its poverty stands revealed in its inability to name the individual man as a particular being and to account for his loves, hatreds, anger, and depression, which still exist in a modern society that has been constructed with no higher thought than to securing man’s happiness and comfort.

But has rule by the expert lost its prestige, that most critical factor in power of any kind? One place to begin is with a Percyian analysis of gender identity politics, seen not merely as a set of claims diametrically opposed to traditional sexual norms but also as a confused reaction to the ways our scientific reduction of human experience has evacuated the ability of words to describe reality. If standards of truth are found only in the general description of phenomena, as qualified and measured by science, then what do we do with our most intimate longings to know the truth about ourselves? Might it be the case that if the capacity of language to speak authentically about man’s particular experiences is denied by a scientific mentality that insists that the intellect can grasp events only through positive data and general descriptions, then all manner of strange outcomes and tendencies might result?

Might words become an attempt to reclaim meaning, which is now believed to be found in various identities? Words are then volitional attempts to prove and enforce this meaning of subjective gender. In this way, the prohibitions and licenses of postmodern gendering are a reclamation of language on behalf of a cultural meaning of sorts. To note this is certainly not to countenance what is occurring here, but to take stock of its intimate, if not highly strained, connection to man as a being radically oriented to the use of language and culture to understand himself. What all this could mean is really anyone’s guess. But to engage gender theory properly must involve an understanding of man that

is not explicable in scientific terms, and this leads, paradoxically, to a more coherent and well-founded encounter with man's nature and the relational grounds of our reason.

### *Return to tradition*

With Percy, we can affirm that the naming of things is the unique aspect of the person, and that it creates art, religion, and culture. There is no other animal that names things. If a scientific morality is pulled back, then man begins his quest for meaning against existential anxiety anew. The need for man to understand himself not as a subject of others' planning but as his own self-governing being takes on a new urgency. And the culture, words, and symbols that compose it reacquire the precision that has been lost under scientism. This inevitably invites religion and its ideas and imagery back into man's realm of authentic knowing.

In *The Last Gentleman*, Walker Percy's character Will Barrett tries desperately to outrun his Mississippi family's Christ-haunted, death-dealing past, but he is ceaselessly driven back to his ancestral origins. After a troubled stint at Princeton and hiding out as a building engineer in New York, a mentally disordered Will returns to the South. Toward the end, Will finds himself one night outside his family's old home. And there, standing under its ancient trees, he stumbles across an almost submerged hitching post that his grandfather and father had once used, and he is momentarily transferred to their memories. But he loses hold of the iron post too quickly, and his consciousness races back to his disordered present. In a later gloss on this scene, Percy said that the hitching post represented a sacrament of the ordinary. The meaning contained within its sheer gratuity offers Will clues to who he is and shows him that his life and his past are a gift that he cannot unmake. Will, however,

was not able to receive this gift. He turns away from his family and its unique participation in the culture of the fading old South. Only when compelled to face the demands of death, as a young boy that he was taking care of succumbs to leukemia, does Will begin to understand what has preceded and shaped him.

Tradition gives life because it orders our experience in its development of our nature with the arts, language, architecture, culture, and religion, which we might say form a second nature in us. This is not a call for worthless nostalgia but for a fuller conception of what it means to live as a relational person, one whose horizon is not limited to the present, as in liberalism, or sacrificed to the future, as in the progressive mode. And this means that we embrace the horizon of Burke's intergenerational partnership.

On the other side of Justice Kennedy's radical opening statement in *Obergefell*, which claimed that constitutionalism's deep meaning is providing legal definition to autonomous identities, are the voices of Burke, Eliot, and Percy. They remind us that autonomy produces its own negation, which opens it up to collectivism. After all, what would it mean to live in a social and political order where every institution was self-chosen? How thick would memory be and how thin might the autonomous individuals who compose such a society be? What really shapes us are the gifts, the memories, and the collective past that provide a calling to our personal liberty, apprenticing us in how to use it well. Absent these things, we become the instruments of the biggest game around, the state, which makes and orders the individual, closing him in upon himself.

From the vantage point of tradition, the fanciful enshrining of autonomy wipes out our individuality by emptying our consciousness of the memories it contains of the always haunted past in favor of a self-created future. Denying that we are formed

by an accumulation of inheritances leaves us nowhere. It leaves us nothing on which to build that self-created future. To locate the meaning of all existence within our finite being is to carry more weight than we can

bear. If reflection on tradition leads us to humility with regard to our past, then a great deal is accomplished. America is no exception to the challenge of tradition. †

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## The Loss of One

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Donald Mace Williams

It struggled, grounded, brown and ugly,  
overtipped from its nest limb  
Where two who fed it worm and bug  
Were perched and grackle-cursing him.

He, walking out from where small shoe  
Prints still, to him, were clear to see  
In the dark front-room carpet, knew  
He couldn't climb the nestling's tree

With bird in hand, parents and child  
Helpless before what had to come  
That night, green-eyed and alley-wild  
While darkness held them, he hoped, numb.

Tomorrow, would they know their nest  
Was short one brown and unnamed head,  
Or, lucky birds, care for the rest,  
Remembrance of the lost one dead?