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Introduction

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR VALUES FROM?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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