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61

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Optimistic or
Pessimistic?

By Midge Decter



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IS CONSERVATISM OPTIMISTIC OR PESSIMISTIC?

by Midge Decter

At first glance, the question of whether conservatism is optimistic or pessimistic seems to touch on an issue centrally important to the discussion of what it means to be conservative. We are all, I think, aware of the, lately mostly unspoken, debate out of which this question arises: it is a debate about nothing less critical in determining a person's political and social attitudes than his vision of the nature of man. We also know--or should--where conservatism comes out in this debate, that to be conservative is to view man as a deeply flawed and fallible creature, restricted in understanding, beset with temptations and base impulses, a sinner (or, I prefer to think of it, a cheater, whose entire history on earth has been one long series of stratagems to renege on God's bargain). A true conservative, then, believes that this imperfect and imperfectible creature, who must vacillate forever between singing with the angels and stampeding with the animals, needs laws and traditions and ordered expectations of life for the fulfillment of his moral, which is to say, his human, nature. In a good society, the conservative believes, these laws will be just and humane, these traditions ennobling, these ordered expectations properly anchored in piety. But in no society can they be dispensed with. In this, the true conservative differs fundamentally from the true libertarian.

"Yetzer adam ra mi'neurav," God, whose first language in those days was Hebrew, says in the book of Genesis: "From the days of his youth the inclination of man is to evil." Having been granted free will, man can be counted on to spend a goodly portion of it on disobedience. The history of mankind since the days of the Creation I do not suppose has given God any compelling reason to change his mind. For conservatives, you might say it has been the better part of political wisdom to bear that divine discovery in mind and to incorporate it within their sense of political expectation.

Yet we see about us a conservative movement--active, busy, lively, and bursting with ambition to alter the world's social,

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political, and economic arrangements. Is there not some contradiction between a "movement," particularly a movement currently occupied with political action and the wielding of political power, and conservatism as it essentially is?

Just such a challenge to the conservative movement has lately been thrown out by more than one conservative thinker, and it is a challenge not to be lightly dismissed. Some of the conservative bustle around us does smack dangerously of liberalism, in the sense of suggesting or implying that there are policies, certain public "fixes," that may yet restore us to Eden. Paradise-to-come is after all the preserve of liberalism, whose founding belief that men, and by extension the society of men, may yet be brought to perfection has been known to lead--need I even say it--to massive tyranny, bloodshed, and brutality.

So yes, from a certain point of view conservatism does obligate its adherents to sustain, and remain mindful of, a firm bedrock of pessimism.

But having said that, I find I have said very little. Important as the question in my title seems when one first hears it, on further consideration the opposition of optimism and pessimism only leads us directly back to First Principles--a terrain where banalities and "big think" lie in wait for us at every turn.

Permit me, therefore, to ask, and attempt to answer, a related but very different question. My question is a simple one, and carries us into the realm of everyday experience. The question I prefer to ask today is, does conservatism make you gloomy or cheerful?

My perhaps paradoxical answer is that it is the very pessimism of conservatism which makes it the greatest possible source of good cheer for those who follow its dictates. For cheer is the wellhead of (actually it is the same as) vitality; and nothing is more conducive to the genuine flow of vitality than a full-hearted acceptance of the limits of man's nature and capacities.

My impulse at this point is simply to call to the witness stand a Mr. William F. Buckley, or a Dr. Edwin J. Feulner, or any one of scores of figures, public and private, who may or may not be familiar to you, to call them to the stand, point my finger, and let my case rest. A cursory examination of just half an ordinary day in the life of either the gentlemen I have named or others I have not named would provide all that is needed by way of an ideal definition of vitality.

Nevertheless I shall try, albeit gropingly, to put into words what I mean. By good cheer, I do not mean that conservatism is guaranteed to leave 'em dancing in the aisles. Each of us in this room has certainly had a fair share of days over the past few years colored by worry and frustration. One might almost be able to

discover a perfect inverse ratio between the height of the hopes that overtook many conservatives upon the coming to power of Ronald Reagan and the intensity of their frustration at having to learn, or we might better say, relearn, that the world even as presided over by a man completely in tune with their ideas is made of pretty intractable stuff. (Here indeed was a case when a bit of distanced skepticism, that attractive and reliable first cousin of pessimism, would have stood more than a few of us in good stead.) Nor have our worry and frustration abated in the least with the passage of time. On the contrary. There are so many things we see so clearly--no doubt, being human, we have confusions of our own, but there are whole patches of clarity that constitute a consensus among us--and yet we must stand by and watch our countrymen being drowned in obfuscation and superstition; our President wavering uncertainly between antipodes of desire, the desire to do what he believes is necessary and the desire to be loved; and a whole flock of opposition politicians whose dream of returning to power has suborned their sense of responsibility to the nation. Beyond politics, we see cultural and spiritual catastrophes brewing. Our cultural and artistic institutions are a disgrace; our universities, an open scandal. Millions of our fellow citizens rush around adopting this phony nostrum and that, all the way from miracle diets and special exercises to the reorganization of work and family life, all in the name of their unconcealed longing to evade the reality both of the lives given to them and of the death that inevitably awaits them. In the process they are surrounding themselves, and us, with a culture so trivial and poverty-stricken, so mean and small and self-referring, as fairly to take the air right out of our lungs.

So the cheer I am talking about has nothing to do with the sensation of political and cultural success. For the conservative movement, as for any other, successes and failures--and the satisfactions and disappointments respectively proper to them--can be plotted on some curve that does not in its details necessarily provide a coherent picture. But that is quite beside the point. Conservatism makes you cheerful because in ways not always understood by many conservatives it tells you what it is given to you to do and what it is not given to you to do in the course of each passing day. And the true possibility for joy in one's undertakings lies not in their outcome but in the undertaking itself. Happiness, as Aristotle tried to teach us, is not a condition in itself, but the accompaniment of an activity.

Each of us, of course, translates these large but very specific truths about human existence into the terms most familiar to him. I am, as you know, a Jew, and for me the exemplary illustration of the point I am trying to make is contained in an old East European Jewish folk tale. For me, it is the quintessential conservative story, though its original author would undoubtedly have been bewildered to think that one day there would be a world in which it would seem necessary to give it such an adjective. This is the story about a

humble shoemaker, Mendel, from a muddy little village somewhere in the Jewish Pale of Settlement who dies and in due course arrives at the entrance to the Judgment Seat. In all too familiar a manner, he begins to apologize for his humble station in life and to offer various excuses for his not having been able to rise above it. The heavenly minions who are to usher him before his Final Judge interrupt him and say, "Listen, when you stand before the Creator, He will not ask you why you were not Moses or King David or one of the Prophets. He will ask you why you were not Mendel the shoemaker."

To accept the knowledge that as a human being you are limited--indeed, limited most of all in that you can never really know what those limits are and how far beyond your present capacity they extend--to accept this knowledge, as true conservatism requires, is to understand that life is not a right, not an entitlement, but a gift. There is no single life, however lousy, however full of pain and anxiety and seeming unfairness, that is not a gift. Gratitude for this gift, even if it seems to others to be a meager or worthless one, is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the attitude to which people would nowadays affix the rather paltry term "conservative." And everything you think about the most mundane and worldly matters preoccupying you these days--tax bills, for instance, or welfare policy, or what to do about Nicaragua--in the end hangs on that one underlying issue: whether to bless or curse whatever of life has been granted us. Atheists tend to think of religion--correction: like to think of religion--as dreary. Because it is so full of "Thou shalt not's" and also "Thou shalt's" that are so difficult to live up to. But most, perhaps all, of the world's great religions--I do not understand Buddhism and so will not speak for it--are systems for adumbrating ways of being grateful. Some emphasize this, some emphasize that, but each is based on the sense of miracle that we are here at all and on the understanding that we may not ultimately know, and are not to contend with, why. If you think this is not a recipe for cheer, try getting up in the morning and, before facing even the first of the day's problems, actually saying a word of thanks for the fact that you lived through the night.

The opportunity to grapple one's problems, if need be, to break one's head against them, is, conservatism understands, the only opportunity needed and the only opportunity granted. We are not guaranteed victory, but we are guaranteed the chance to pursue it day by day. What could be more enlivening?

As for the other side of my equation, that is, optimism and gloom, I ask you to consider. Suppose you believed that the history of world has been one long uphill progression from darkness to light, that man as we now know him is merely the capstone of this progress so far, and who knows what great permutation we may expect to come next. We can see what dreams such optimism is already driving people to. There is the dream that women need no longer be women, nor men, men.

There is that dream that science and medical technology will, if only they stay at the task long enough, enable us to live forever.

There is the dream--or rather, it is a vast complex of interconnected dreams--that the right tricks of social organization will make it possible for everyone to be equally rich, equally admired, equally permitted to pursue his transient desires; that sex will be like the gentle rain, abundant, morally neutral, without consequence, physical or emotional, a cleansing and soothing exercise; that babies will be produced painlessly and reared flawlessly by some general entity called society; that no handicapped people or potential sufferers of dread diseases need be born to trouble our serenity and that handicaps or diseases created by accidents of fate can be cured or their bearers disposed of; that crime will be extirpated and violence expunged from the earth. There is the dream that one might call the dream of perfect communication, in which more highly evolved men, having somehow disposed of their troublesome inferiors, will sit down together and, understanding one another, put an end to war. All this--if only we are clever enough to figure out how to arrange it.

There are those who will say that I exaggerate and caricature the aspiration of the optimists. I do not. For every dream I have just listed, there is an abundant body of documents, published in books and read and celebrated in language of the deepest reverence by spokesmen for the liberal community.

As I said, suppose you believed such things: what would happen to you? First, of course, you would be able to put away all the hard and great books, those treasured storehouses of the accumulated experience and earned wisdom of our ancestors, those benighted children of darkness past. (In fact, many of the educational institutions dominated by the liberal, or optimistic, world view have to a large extent already done so.) Coming into the adult world, then, naked as a jaybird and with an equally naked and uncomprehended technology available to you for your manipulations, how would you feel? You would feel that you were owed a perfect, painless, conflict-free existence, and that therefore real life, which is none of these things, and cannot be, was a kind of unfair conspiracy against you. The equal riches and equal admiration that you took to be your due, to the extent that they actually did get more equal, would turn out to be equal poverty and equal contempt. Injured vanity, jealousy, the decline of your powers--no matter how many health regimens, faceless sexual encounters, and applications of new medical techniques you obediently took upon yourself--would still be with you, now experienced as injustice and failure.

It is not for nothing that "rage" has been one of the favorite words, offered in explanation of all deviant behavior, of the liberal community for something like a couple of decades now. The rage imputed to others is as likely as not some form of what the psychologists have termed projection. The rage so frequently invoked

is more often than not the invoker's own. If you do not believe me, just look at the faces, listen to the voices, think about the language used by those declaring their determination to gain dominion over, and remake, human nature. Try to comprehend what these optimists are really saying. You will find that they are not saying that we need to do as much as possible--possible--to improve the lot of the poor; they are saying that a life in poverty is not worth living. They are not saying that we must use the science God gave us to make the world hospitable to its expanding population; they are saying that we must use it to make sure that there will be fewer people, less life. They are not saying let us make ourselves worthy of the mysterious gift of being alive by cherishing our young, so that they may cherish their young; they are saying let us allow ourselves only those young who are easy to cherish so that they may be worthy of our cherishing,. They do not say let us reason together about how to protect and defend the best political system we have yet been able to devise; they say, let us speak to one another only of its flaws that in so speaking we may encourage one another to hold out for the best system that has never yet, and that may never yet, be devised. In other words, into their very optimism is built the refusal of the possible, and into such refusal is built eternal disappointment.

The habits of rage and disappointment, if you will permit me again to have recourse to the language of psychotherapy, lead to depression. Never mind that this particular kind of depression claims for itself the name of idealism. Idealism, even as it defines itself, is the denial of real moral choices for the sake of unreal ones. You all know the fable of the donkey on the road who sees a bale of hay in the field on either side of him and, unable to choose, starves to death. The denial of real moral choices for the sake of unreal ones leads to inner starvation.

There you have your social optimism: unweening ambition leading to rage, unholy fantasies leading to disappointment, and perverse will leading to spiritual starvation. With such hopes and such dreams, who needs poison?

A lot of ordinary Americans know these things in their bones. They do, it is true, like to hear about a shining city on a hill. They like to hear about it just because they have for so long been up to their necks in optimistic gloom. But what they settle for, and gladly, is a not-too-smoggy city on a rise. They do not, except on occasions like the Liberty anniversary that will soon be upon us, tend to sing hosannas. Actually, they are wont to grumble now and then. But they do, by and large, when it counts, know that they are lucky. As conservatives, we need not ask any more of them. Or of ourselves.

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