

LEAVING THE CHURCH OF MORAL PURITY

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Much has been written about the possible professional and financial costs of speaking out against the excesses of the ideological left but I think far too little has been said about the emotional and existential conflicts that occur within people when they can no longer ignore the necessity of doing so. I've struggled with this myself the past several years and have come to understand a number of the internal conflicts that occur and the interior shifts necessary for me resolve them.

The overriding problem is, of course, our common human need to belong. As John Searle, author of *Making the Social World*, comments, there is “a human urge to conform, to be like other people and to be accepted by them as a member of the group.” Most people understand this to one extent or another, some people are highly conscious of it, others simply respond to the primal need itself without thinking about it. There are many reasons why the urge exists. One is simply our deep need for human contact. We are at root a social species. Numerous studies have found, as the American Psychological Association comments, that prolonged social isolation (as with solitary confinement) puts people “at grave risk of psychological harm.” This can include what the APA describes as a “descent into madness.” This commonly includes panic attacks, severe depression, paranoia, and sometimes hallucinatory episodes. In essence, loss of regular human contact is extremely destabilizing. Eric Berne, the developer of Transactional Analysis, wrote at some length about the essential nature of our need for human contact. He talked about the need for what he called “strokes” which he defined as “units of recognition.” These are the

emotional exchanges that occur when one person, through touch, voice, or non-verbal communication recognizes the existence of another. As many studies have found, this appears to be a basic human need, much like food and shelter. Although every individual needs a different quantity of “strokes,” the need is itself fundamental.

However, underneath the fear of loss of strokes, and its attendant health impacts, is something far more difficult. I think Professor Francis O’Gorman gets to the heart of it when he says:

I think it helps us to understand how terrifying the notion of exile was for the Ancient world. It really was a fate worse than death; it was a living death. It was to be cast out of the city which had given the citizen identity. It wasn't just to be rootless and homeless; it was to be identity-less – it was to be denied access to the structures of both the city and thought itself which gave one a reason to live.

The communities (or tribes) we become part of not only fulfill our need for “strokes” they also function to give us a sense of identity. In essence, the groups with which we associate, to differing degrees, reflect back to us who we are. They are performative in that they define and maintain our identities as individuals, as human beings. The more a group performs this function, the more entangled in our self-identity it becomes. Thus to speak out against what the group considers foundational to its mission or function is to risk exile and the loss of self-identity that exile will cause. Such a risk forces an internal encounter with the roots of personal identity, something for which most of us are not prepared. Who are we if the external reflection of our

identity is removed? Who are we when there is no external reflection to tell us who we are? When work identity and social position and friendships and family are all removed? When we are only us and nothing else? Very few people ever take the journey to find out. It is the hardest journey I know.

These are not easy questions to answer. They take years of internal struggle. And all the while one lives in the midst of a unique kind of darkness in which personal identity is lost, where the touchstones for identity are gone, where one lives day to day literally not knowing who one is. Nearly all people avoid this, for, as I have found from personal experience, it is one of the most terrifying experiences I have ever known. (Though, of course, on the other side of it there lies one of the greatest freedoms I have ever felt.)

The threat of this loss of identity, of being cast out of the group that gives one a sense of self, is one of the most powerful leverages used against any divergence from a group's foundational beliefs. As Russell Blackford in his book *The Tyranny of Opinion* comments:

[Enforced conformity to group belief] lends itself to tribalism, to punishment of harmless (or even socially helpful) nonconformists, to demands for unnecessarily uniform speech and action. . . . it does not combine general acceptance of the group's attitudes, beliefs, and ways of acting and speaking with selective areas of doubt or dissent. Individual conformity to a group's values and practices tend to be all or nothing. . . . Each member will be more accepted, trusted, and rewarded to the extent she resembles the prototype.

This demand for conformity to group belief is common among many religious orders. The threat of excommunication, of being cast out, is often integral to the religion itself. (If you do not accept Jesus Christ as your savior, then you are part of or complicit with forces that oppose Him and His mission on earth.)

It is also an essential aspect of other groups with foundational beliefs around which the group has formed. This includes groups not normally considered religious such as western reductionist science. (The English philosopher Mary Midgeley has written extensively on this.) It also includes many of the social and political movements currently in vogue among the ideological left.

As the media makes clear everyday, any deviance from the accepted beliefs of the left's social justice movements results in instant denigration, shaming, ostracism, and quite often exile. Numerous writers, feminists, sex activists, musicians, artists, political commentators, and regrettably herbalists – in short anyone foolish enough to publically diverge from the party line, have been singled out, even for events decades in their past when they were young and their moral nature was still developing. Some stand by their statements or past behaviors, most cravenly apologize to gain absolution and thus avoid exile . . . and the loss of income and standing it entails.

The more ideologically fundamentalist the group is, the more brutal the sanctions will often be. Group leaders utilize the threat of sanctions, and actual sanctioning, to enforce conformity with the ideological structures in place. Group members, seeing what happens to ideological dissenters, are thus strongly motivated to conform, whether they completely accept the ideological beliefs of the group or not.

For many liberals, especially those with a long history of belief and activism (such as those who have been highly engaged since the 1960s and '70s as I also have been) the threat is extreme. Decades of membership in the group and its supportive reflection of self-identity make it very difficult to take a stand in opposition. For me, and I think for many, contemplating doing so immediately causes an existential response that is closer to terror than mere fear. For the majority of people I know, the response has been to continue to “go along to get along.”

As the ideological pronouncements of the group become more extreme and the behaviors and speech necessary to remain morally aligned increase, the internal conflict becomes more difficult to resolve.

From my own internal struggles (and what I have seen in others) it appears that there are only three options in response: 1) continue to conform to the group, adopting more extreme positions as they become necessary; 2) join another group that is in opposition to the group one leaves (usually with a strong residue of rage toward the original group by whom one feels betrayed); 3) resolve the existential conflict. This latter choice I have found to be the most difficult.

The Enlightenment liberal injunction to know thyself is not considered of much merit in our time. Nevertheless, I feel it is the only viable solution, at least for those of us who wish to maintain our self-respect, to not, as Barry Lopez once put it, “become the enemies of our souls or memories.” Further, it is incumbent upon all of us who still believe in Enlightenment liberalism to struggle through these kinds of existential conflicts, especially this one. For only if this essential form of liberalism finds articulate voices will it be able to endure against the mobs that are now forming to destroy it.

I received much help from my family during my struggles to resolve this issue, a help that is, unfortunately for many, not always forthcoming. I found it essential to my emotional health, and my sense of self-identity, as I began the journey of actively dissociating myself from the liberal groups with which I had associated for the past four decades.

Intellectual help in finding ways to articulate what I was struggling to understand came from a number of exceptionally thoughtful writers, some contemporary, others not. (John Stuart Mill, *The Federalist Papers*, Conor Friedersdorf, Matt Taibbi, Andrew Sullivan, Mary Midgeley, numerous sex worker activists, Rita Felski – and everyone she cited in her book *The Limits of Critique*, William Deresiewicz, Russell Blackford, and a great many others.)

Parsing the intellectual terrain, understanding just why and how the ideological left's arguments are so terribly flawed I found to be crucial. Unfortunately, by itself it was not sufficient. There is also an internal psychological journey that must also be made. It is far more difficult than mere mentation.

The writer I found to be most useful about this particular aspect of my struggle is Carl Schmitt and his book *The Concept of the Political* (University of Chicago Press, 1996, from a problematical 1932 translation). Tracy Strong, in her forward to that book, made some comments that opened up unexpected directions to my thinking; I found it particularly helpful.

The first was this . . .

Schmitt's existential Hobbesianism thus saw moral claims as implicitly denying the finality of death in favor of an abstract universalism in which human beings were not particularly involved in what they were (page xvii).

Strong's (and Schmidt's) communication style leave a lot to be desired, nevertheless, from further reading and contemplation I understood this statement to mean:

1) "Moral claim" here refers to assertions put forward by a group as to what proper, moral behaviors are in response to external phenomena. Specifically, it describes the phenomenon of a group engaging in social activism which determines the proper, moral behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that must be adhered to by every member of that group.

2) Schmitt asserts that whenever this happens the reality ("finality") of death is implicitly denied because . . .

3) The members of the group have now subscribed to an "abstract universalism." By this Schmitt means something akin to a religious belief in an enduring concept that transcends time. Thus an internal sense of the finality of death loses meaning. People may come and go but the concept is eternal and of such importance that it becomes the only thing of ultimate value.

4) In consequence, people are no longer particularly involved in their own individual humanness. Specifically, they no longer explore the complexity of their own nature but abandon that necessity in service to the universal humanism they serve (whose particulars and the speech which reflects them are defined by the most forceful members of the group). In other words, the members of the group are held within the orbit of an ethical universalism and by being so held they abandon behaviors that result in the loss of the core of their individuality.

Of all these, the insight that abstract universalism, by its nature, entails a personal loss of the realization that death (and the conflict and suffering that goes along with it) are integral to life I found to be the most important. Inherent within them (and I don't know how to explain why this is so for me) is the understanding that no utopia is attainable simply because people and life

are far too complex to orient themselves as a group to a single ideal. The attainment of an abstract universalism is always centered around a utopian goal; it consistently ignores that there are many other perspectives on how to live and that many people will never give up those perspectives. So, ideological advocates eventually, always, resort to force of one sort or another in order to make them do so. (And no, people don't just have those other perspectives because they are deluded.)

Several paragraphs later Strong writes:

Two questions are at stake here. The first is whether it is possible to escape the hold of an ethical universalism; the second is that if it is possible, where then does one find oneself? (Ibid)

She notes that Schmitt answers the first question in the affirmative. He explains that it is possible *only if* “the reality of conflict and death remain present.” I consider Schmitt’s insights here to be significant.

My own experience of being a committed liberal the past 40 years is that my participation in the larger liberal community in the United States worked well until the ideological left gained control over its foundational beliefs. As that process unfolded I began to feel an increasing sense of alienation from my political community. (A process that Schmitt explores in some depth later in the book, e.g. page 22, second paragraph, page 23, last paragraph.) As my 1960s outlook became supplanted with doctrines that I felt antithetical to human individuality (and thus a healthy democracy) I began to seriously question the abstract universalism that was being put

forward as foundational. Immediately, the “reality of conflict and death” became apparent. In other words, abstract universalism began to reveal itself as a utopian dream more akin to the idea of heaven than a realizable goal. This did not mean, of course, that I now thought all social activism misplaced, but rather that it takes place in the midst of the inevitability of conflict, suffering, and death, that progress is slow, that the end goal is never reached because by the complex nature of things it cannot be reached.

Strong notes that Schmitt asserts that only when the reality of conflict and death are integrated into a comprehensive view of life (which does not mean viewing it as the *only* reality but merely one aspect of life among many) can individuals become responsible for what and who they are.

Schmitt here, without using these terms, is revealing that slavish adherence to an abstract universalism prevents the crucial descent of self into the interior of an individual life. It does not support that descent because when such a descent occurs, people begin to struggle with their own individual perspectives on what matters to them and what does not. This, by the nature of such interior descent, means that the abstract universalism to which the group adheres could easily become questioned, that in fact it inevitably *is* questioned. Thus the development of the individual self is curtailed in order that the abstract universalism be blindly served.

John Stuart Mill, whom Blackford quotes, makes a similar observation:

Spontaneity forms no part of the ideal of the majority of moral and social reformers but is rather looked on with jealousy as a troublesome and perhaps rebellious obstruction to the general acceptance of what these reformers, in their

own judgement, think would be best for mankind. (page 81)

Finally, Schmitt asserts that the abandonment of the abstract universal, the reclamation of an integrated sense of conflict and death, then “transcends” the moral claim and the individual moves, inevitably, into “the realm of nature.”

By that statement Schmitt is asserting that nature has within it its own moral structure in which the reality of conflict and death is irrevocably interwoven, that this realm is transcendent to the human moral structures that have been postulated, that within that realm the development of human individuality can occur. By this he does not mean that “nature is red in tooth and claw” or that some sort of Romantic idea of Nature is fundamental but that the reality of the natural world contains a complexity of meanings within itself that is superior to the human created meanings that most of us subscribe to during the course of our lives. (And I believe that this connection to the larger and more complex world that Schmitt is calling nature is in fact essential to our survival as a species. Subscribing to a merely human orientation is, at its core, hubris. The current ecological state of the world makes this plain.) In other words, Schmitt is attacking the simplicity of thinking that is so often prevalent among the ideological left (and many other groups such as reductionist scientists), pointing to a greater complexity, one that holds within it the inevitability of suffering and death. In other words, it extends thinking outside of the limited human frame within which most ideological utopians exist.

It has been hard for me to break my codependency with my liberal tribe, to discover what my self-identity becomes when that cocoon no longer surrounds me. It has been a very difficult process. In many respects it is very similar to dealing with the death of a loved one. I went through many of the stages of grief that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross outlines in her seminal work on death and dying: denial, depression, rage, grief, and finally acceptance. These stages do not occur in order, as Kubler-Ross continually reminded everyone, but occur in a kind of jumbled mess . . . and they take time. It would have been easier to simply move into an oppositional hatred of the ideological left, and much faster and less painful, but I strongly believe in Enlightenment liberalism and could not, in good conscience abandon it.

It is this difficult internal struggle that I think is often missing from discussions of the problems we face from the rise of the ideological activists among the liberal left. It is not easy to accept alienation from a group which has, for many of us, defined our identity for decades. Nevertheless, this shift in my orientation, despite its difficulty, connected me to a much wider human world which contains perspectives that are not necessarily the same as mine but which do allow me a common bond with the essential human dignity of all individuals and allows the legitimate existence of other orientations in all their complexity. We do need to find a way to get along with those who think much differently than we do and to not deny them their own human agency. We also have to recognize that the human world is a very small part of all that is, and that none of us have access to the sole truth of existence . . . or even those truths that can make our culture a better one.