

Is Liberalism Dead (In All Forms)?, Part 2



By Steven Yates

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[Part 1](#). Recommended reading before tackling the material below. Don't worry, I'll wait.

We've sketched the background of liberalism, distinguishing two forms of classical liberalism (one Christian, the other secular), and noted the Stages of civilization (in Auguste Comte's sense) in which classical liberalism developed and began to flourish. There is a sense in which classical liberalism's Christian form originated as a Second Stage idea, then helped enable the shift to the Third Stage as its successes focused more and more attention on *this* world and the possibilities of human autonomy.

One consequence is that Christian-backed classical liberalism all but died out. In Third Stage civilization, theism wanes. To the extent it doesn't die out altogether, as it mostly has in the academic world, it becomes a marginalized societal decoration.

Lastly in Part 1, we noted the dichotomy between those who saw Third Stage modernity as liberating and exhilarating, celebrating achievements past and achievements to come, versus those who saw trouble ahead.

Arguably, the whole thing has now gone sideways. Modernity has accomplishments under its belt that no one disputes:

technologies that would have been science fiction to our ancestors. Conveniences and creature comforts they couldn't have imagined. But as persons we've been left isolated, filled with a sense of emptiness (paradoxical as that sounds), in a world filled with vacuous indifference to our very existence, where we risk being thrown to the wolves when we cease to be useful in the economic system (i.e., helping someone richer than we are make even more money). We may be surrounded by luxuries but still feel a sense of foreboding and even dread in our bones. Our mortality scares us; our lives simply bore us.

Some, of course, insist that these are the best times in all of human history to be alive (think of Steven Pinker, or Matt Ridley), with more prosperity, less violence, greater opportunities, and so on. But in a sense that is difficult to put our fingers on, it doesn't *feel* real.

What happened?

Will a closer look at the first premises of classical liberalism help us? Let's find out.

***Homo Economicus* I. Cartesian Spooks.**

Go back first to Second Stage Pure Reason. To its foremost sixteenth century exponent: French mathematician, physicist and philosopher René Descartes. Pivotal figure in the history of ideas.

Troubled by fellow Frenchman Michel to Montaigne's epistemic skepticism, and by the increasing evidence of culturally diverse worldviews revealed by the incipient Age of Discovery, Descartes sought a *permanent grounding* for knowledge: permanent in that once grasped, it would be seen to hold true for *all* peoples, *all* places, *all* times, through *the sheer force of its logical necessity*. (It isn't clear to *me* what either man was so anxious about.)

Descartes believed he'd solved the problem with his "*Cogito ergo sum.*" *I think, therefore I am.* A phrase drummed into every philosophy student's head. Descartes saw this as his autonomous intellect speaking, denuded of the five senses, science, God, even mathematics. His Pure Reason would quickly add these all back, but on a very different foundation: that of his autonomous intellect and its capacity, on its own, to discern eternal truth by the "natural light of reason," he called it, or using "rules for the direction of the mind."

Autonomous intellect, or *mind*, confronted the world as a homunculus: a little isle of intellect, inside a body made of something called *matter* (or as Descartes called it, *corporeal substance*) surrounded by myriad other objects also made of corporeal substance. The infamous ghost in the machine, in other words. The Cartesian spook inside our heads.

Dualism is the term philosophers use for this idea.

In Cartesian dualism was the seed of classical liberalism, which when it sprouted, transformed the homunculus into *homo economicus*: a private utility-maximizer, inherently subjective and rationally self-interested, a walking and speaking human calculating device participating in markets, buying and consuming, selling and profiting, looking for *quid pro quos* and edges – and willing to take short cuts where short cuts were findable. Bastiat would observe, centuries later, in *The Law* that labor is often painful or just dreary. So we try to maximize our gain with the least amount of effort, and we rationalize this if this happens at others' expense.

Bastiat had not been the first to cast doubt on the idea that markets are always beneficent – or, more exactly, their participants would necessarily use them in beneficent ways.

In his famous *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argued not for complete *laissez faire* as people like Ayn Rand and Libertarians would do in another couple of centuries. He saw

the necessity of an encirclement of sensible regulations around business, created and imposed by the state. Why? Because without such outside checks on their behavior, businessmen would collude, form cartels, and fix prices. They wouldn't maintain genuine free markets.

The situation was worse, of course. Today we know how easy it has been for the superrich to compromise even this system of checks on their power with regulatory capture. But alas, we're ahead of ourselves.

Liberalism was going sideways. Its drawback is its first premise. Understanding this is why *attending to basics* – *first premises* – is *always* a good idea. We're *not* creatures of Pure Reason with autonomous intellects. We have emotions that are integral parts of our personalities, or as Smith's friend and associate David Hume called them, *passions*. Hume had little difficulty in show that these, not reason, are the primary drivers of decision-making.

Nor, as others (Thomas Hobbes is an example) believed, are we utterly self-interested. Unless we are hermits, or are isolated, we may have had people around us we cared about so deeply that we would have given our lives for them. It is normal to care about family, friends, others in our vicinity to the extent they will permit it, unless we are narcissists or sociopaths.

Not simply to profit. Not to "feel good about ourselves." As an end in itself.

Egoism – psychological or ethical – is simply false! Philosophers have refuted it many, many times.

Twentieth Century Storm Clouds.

Classical liberals such as Bastiat had a Christian worldview, as I've noted. What I've called *The Real Great Replacement* (of Christendom with materialism), a product of Third Stage

thought supplanting that of the Second Stage, scissored the Christian element out of liberalism. By Mill's time this process was nearing completion, in the intellectual centers anyway.

Mill's utilitarian ethics again: always try to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number, where good means *happiness or pleasure*.

Mill had introduced Auguste Comte to the English-speaking world. He'd had Comte's writings translated into English. His methodology is implicitly positivist: empirical science is the sole determinant of truth about reality.

Thus we can set philosophy aside. It's major problems are solved, and it remains to use utility maximization to solve societal and technological problems. Economic liberty frees *homo economicus*! Political freedom leads to democratic institutions (the British monarchy had become a mere decoration, however wealthy!).

Morally: we should not harm others. Not because God had anything to say about it, but because harming others decreases utility. The same is true of freedom of speech and thought. Mill's criticisms of censorship in *On Liberty* come down to its interference with the most efficient path to increases in knowledge. Even if a suppressed idea is false, we can learn from taking the trouble to refute it, and this increases epistemic utility (one might call it).

This mindset increases everyone's prosperity and well-being.

Straightforward, right?

No need to overthink this!

We can be "positive" because the fruits of science and technique were growing by the day, month, year, decade, century. We'd discovered propulsion, electricity, oil

refinement, vaccines, and more.

In the 1900s, Third Stage economizers went on to invent and build automobiles, aircraft, refrigerators, freezers, washers-driers, interstate highways, countless other electric-powered devices, and the earliest computing machines. Out of fears (based on Sputnik) that the Soviets had gained an edge, Americans redoubled their efforts at science education in the late 1950s. A decade later, we were in outer space.

To this, we attributed liberal capitalism and its freeing of the human spirit to rise as high and go as far as we were capable. Clearly, by the 1950s, America – its economy the strongest in human history – had achieved heights that were previously unimaginable.

But not all was well in paradise.

Intellectually and educationally, we had begun to drift. This is a story told many times, with many different emphases. With just a few exceptions for those whose ideas proved useful to capitalist utility, intellectualism-for-its-own-sake doesn't really serve capitalism. Thus government schools never much encouraged intellectual curiosity outside a few well-trod paths.

But outside that rather cloistered world, it was clear that the liberty of old-school liberalism wasn't bringing benefits equally, or allowing everyone equal opportunities.

Hence civil rights, and women's liberation, conceivably understood as efforts to apply *the same principles to everyone*, especially given the dictum that "all men are created equal" updated to include women also created in God's image (who, after all, created us "male and female").

Overcoming racial prejudices and sex-based discrimination so that all the *homo economici* of whatever ethnicity could realize their potential wasn't going to be easy.

Again, pesky passions got in the way, and there were people who would refuse to employ a perfectly qualified black man to do a job. Or woman.

The executive orders and legislation of the 1960s *seemed* necessary and justified to those of us who grew up and came of age back then. There were also anti-poverty programs, as we'd never truly stopped being a society of haves and have-nots. We'd increased the size of the haves by creating a thriving middle class, but this wasn't enough for moral egalitarians.

Very real storm clouds included the war raging in Vietnam toward which a significant fraction of a generation rose up in opposition – for the first time, the effects of war were broadcast into upper and middle class family rooms via that astounding new invention, *television!* – and there were newer expressions of the liberal desire for maximum freedom such as the sexual revolution and psychoactive drugs.

Sometimes liberation was still seen in economic terms; but in cultural or personal terms, it was more and more “*do your own thing*” if, in accordance with Mill's liberalism, you're not harming anyone.

To some extent, as we'll see in Part 3 (next week), we were seeing the subtle infiltration of alien ideas and policies into liberalism. But we were also living out the deep contradiction built into secular liberalism itself, keeping in mind that its goal is the total self-authorization and complete personal autonomy of the individual – a residuum of that Cartesian spook inside every person's head.

[Author's note: due to the pressure of other work projects Part 3 will not appear until next week. Thank you for understanding.]

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Steven Yates is a (recovering) ex-academic with a PhD in Philosophy. He taught for more than 15 years total at several universities in the Southeastern U.S. He authored three books, more than 20 articles, numerous book reviews, and review essays in academic journals and anthologies. Refused tenure and unable to obtain full-time academic employment (and with an increasing number of very fundamental philosophical essays refused publication in journals), he turned to alternative platforms and heretical notions, including about academia itself.

In 2012 he moved to Chile. He married a Chilean national in 2014. Among his discoveries in South America: the problems of the U.S. are problems everywhere, because human nature is the same everywhere. The problems are problems of Western civilization as a whole.

As to whether he'll stay in Chile ... stay tuned!

He has a Patreon.com page. Donate [here](#) and become a Patron if you benefit from his work and believe it merits being sustained financially.

Steven Yates's book *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic* (2011) can be ordered [here](#).

His philosophical work *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory* (2021) can be obtained [here](#) or [here](#).

His paranormal horror novel *The Shadow Over Sarnath* (2023) can be gotten [here](#).

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