

Trump And The End Of Liberalism

Some Hard Truths About The Degradation Of American Democracy

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January 15, 2017 Picture: Lucas Jackson/[Reuters](#).

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I.

There is a natural tendency when something really worrying occurs to minimize it, to normalize it or, like those crucified at Calvary in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, to sing to oneself “always look on the bright side of life.” In the case of the rise of Donald Trump, this takes the form of saying things like “let’s give the guy a chance,” or “that campaign stuff was just hyperbole—he won’t really do those things and now that he is in power he will move towards the center because that’s the only point from which anyone can govern” (which, by the way, is what a lot of



[My Tweets](#)

people said about Hitler when he first came to power, but I digress), or “American institutions are robust enough to survive this,” or “many of the people who voted for him are not racists or anything of the sort but rather people with legitimate concerns about their economic future who reasonably felt they were not being heard by the establishment and the other candidate.” While saying things like this to oneself are comforting because it helps put off the full-blown psychological depression that is sure to come when these hopes are dashed, I do not believe that forced optimism or even its lesser form—the withholding of judgment—is the correct approach in this case. No populist in the history of politics, whether of the left or the right, has ever moved toward the left after obtaining power. The hope that this might occur in Trump’s case is just magical thinking.

I also do not believe that the institutions of liberalism in America are sufficiently robust to survive Trumpism. I think what Trump’s rise tells us is that these institutions have already been seriously undermined, and that destroying whatever remains is seen as an end in itself by a significant portion of the American electorate and the current majority of their elected representatives. When the institutions of liberalism are hammered in this way it is not easy for them to recover. Indeed, given that Trump and his Republican supporters now control (or will soon) all three branches of government and a large part of the state and federal

bureaucracy, we may be able to have a modest impact on what is about to happen if we employ immense effort and constant diligence, but a little softening at the margins is probably all we can accomplish. This is not a reason not to try, of course, but it is a reason to be realistic about what we can achieve.

I also do not believe that we should be careful about labelling everyone who voted for Trump as racist, misogynist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and so on. It is true that not everyone who voted for Trump voted for him *because* of his views on religious, ethnic and racial minorities and women—a large part of his support came from people who claim to have voted for him *despite* these views. But this doesn't make these people somehow immune to moral criticism—they are perhaps a bit less reprehensible than those who voted for Trump *because* of his outrageous views, but it is still pretty reprehensible to put one's perceived economic self-interest or one's interest in a single issue (such as abortion) or even both above the fundamental tenets on which the nation is based [For more on this, see *Lloyd* on the civic duties of citizens].[\[1\]](#)

This is especially true when the supposed reason given by many people for ignoring Trump's bigoted, bullying, and otherwise outrageous comments and attributes was an economic slogan that contained very few specifics and in any case is unlikely to be carried out. At a net worth of \$35 billion and growing, Trump's cabinet is likely to be the richest ever,

hardly the kind of people who are likely to be sensitive to the problems of the ordinary American household, which has a median annual income of about \$55,000.[2] The few specifics that Trump has offered (building a wall and dumping “unfair” trade deals and environmental treaties) will either do nothing for the economy or will have collateral effects that are more likely to increase unemployment than reduce it.[3] And even if Trump’s policies do reduce unemployment in the short-term (Hitler, of course, managed to do this too, by increasing spending on infrastructure and “defense,” just as Trump plans to do), they will lead to lower pay, fewer benefits, greater inequality, exploding deficits, reductions in the quality and availability of public education, the reduction if not the elimination of Medicare and social security benefits for the elderly, the gutting of environmental laws that protect us all, weaker unions (the traditional defenders of the working class), and the loss of health insurance for tens of millions of Americans, including 5 million of the people who voted for Trump.[4] But that’s not all. No matter what happens to the economy in general, Trump’s policies will entrench a level of dynastic wealth that may take centuries—yes centuries—to erode.[5] His policies towards “law and order” are likely to produce a degree of social unrest not seen in the United States since the 1960s.[6] And even if we do not see large-scale social unrest, hundreds of millions of Americans will now have to live in a suffocating cloud of anxiety and existential discomfort not experienced by large segments of a

supposedly liberal nation's own population since the rise of the dictatorships of the 1930s. And, of course, it is not inconceivable that Trump will kill us all if he manages to unleash a major war, which is within the realm of possibility given his thin-skinned and hot-headed personality, his petty vindictiveness, his inability to admit error or listen to advice, his invitation to the Russians to commit acts of aggression, and his reliance on views about the world that, in the words of Mark Twain, “just ain’t so.”

I also want to say something about the fallacy that Trump was elected by working class voters who rightfully felt betrayed by “the establishment elites” and especially by the Democratic party. It is true that Trump did particularly well among white men without a college education—about 72% of white men without a college education voted for Trump.^[7] But this is not by any means where the story lies. It is not surprising that those with the least education and the most to gain by the oppression of minorities and women would be the most easily seduced by the false promises of a demagogue. But 54% of white men *with* a college education also voted for Trump,^[8] which is a large majority by any traditional measure [See *Gordon* and *Bonevac* for why college educated men voted for Trump]. And 53% of white *women*—including 45% percent of college-educated white women—voted for Trump, which is a whole lot of people too (only 4% of black women and 26% of Latinas voted for Trump).^[9] There were also plenty of

educated people who simply did not vote, which is better than voting for Trump, I suppose, but given that Trump won three key states by a collective 100,000 votes these people are subject to moral criticism too, for it was simply not reasonable to have treated the negative attributes of each candidate as equally morally distasteful.

So, let's not blame the supposed ignorance of the working class for Trump's victory—plenty of well-educated people who should have known better voted for Trump too, and a vast majority of non-white non-college educated working class voters did not. The sad truth is that despite their claims to the contrary, Trump was elected because a majority of white people seem to harbor a latent nostalgia for the privilege and deference that was once widely accorded to them throughout the United States and which they hoped to reclaim no matter what the cost of this to those who are currently struggling even more than they are [See *Sullivan* for a discussion of racism in the U.S and the social expectations of some white people].

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Which leads one to wonder why large numbers of white people and especially white men in the US seem to feel oppressed by even the limited success the country has had in eliminating the institutionalized oppression of minorities and

women. It is true that more jobs were created for black and Latino people than were created for white people over the last eight years, but even so, black and Latino populations are still suffering much more: as of the end of the third quarter of 2016, the unemployment rate was 4.4% for whites, 8.3% for blacks, and 6.4% for Latinos.[10] Even though these numbers understate the real extent of the problem for each group, the relation between the figures for whites, blacks, and Latinos holds. Moreover, black men who were working in 2015 earned only 75% as much as white men, and Latinos earned only 69%, and neither group has made progress on this front since the 1980s.[11] So the claim that the suffering of whites is somehow greater than everyone else and therefore justifies their voting for Trump is not supported by the facts.

The best explanation I can come up with here for why whites feel so oppressed even though they are doing better than everyone else is to analogize this to the erroneous sense we all seem to hold about what a typical poker-hand dealt out of well-shuffled deck of cards should look like. Most people think that a deck is well-shuffled and therefore the cards in it randomly distributed if it has been shuffled just once or twice. But mathematicians tell us that it takes at least 7 shuffles to fully randomize a deck. Because we are used to seeing decks of cards shuffled only once or twice, however, when a deck of cards is shuffled 7 times we think there is something wrong with the hands that we are being dealt—the deck must be

rigged against us because we usually receive hands of cards that are far better than what comes out this kind of deck.

Applying this phenomenon to the distribution of opportunities that white people currently enjoy in life, they are so used to seeing what a partially, if not wholly biased, system throws up in their favor that when confronted with the opportunities they are dealt by a more impartial although still biased deck of life, they cannot help but think that this deck is now being rigged against them.

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The claim that the suffering of white people and especially the white working class has been and was being ignored by the Democrats in general and by Obama and Clinton in particular is also nonsense. On the contrary, the creation of Obamacare represented an historic improvement in the lives of millions of unemployed and working Americans and the Democrats and the Obama administration tried time and time again to enact other programs that would have helped the unemployed, the working and the middle class. It was Republican obstructionism, not indifference by Obama and the Democrats, that left the economy, the unemployed, and the working and middle class suffering more than they need have done.^[12] And the Clinton campaign did not ignore the working class either—on the contrary, she presented detailed

plans designed to help alleviate unemployment, raise wages, and protect the dignity of work.[13] Voting for Trump was accordingly not an act of rebellion by the working class against those who had abandoned them, it was a reward for those who had manned the barricades against the interests of everyone but the rich.

What I am now going to do is provide a schema for better understanding what has happened here—how the rise of Trump and Trumpism is not merely a triumph of the right over the left. More ominously, it represents a rejection of the fundamental presuppositions of liberalism that were thought to be firmly and indeed immovably embedded in all modern western capitalist democracies. It is a triumph of a form of anti-liberalism, one that belongs to a family of political theories collectively referred to as “perfectionism.” What Trump and Trumpism represents is an end to what Hegel called “the civil society,” an end to any further movement toward an enlightened future and a dive into the illiberal darkness of the unfortunately not-so-distant past, and very possibly, an end to liberalism altogether.

II.

Let’s begin by getting a better idea of what exactly liberalism is. In common speech, the word “liberal” is often used as a shorthand way of referring to a set of substantive political

positions that are typically associated with the moderate left. But that is not how I will be using the word. I will be using the word to refer to a collection of fundamental presuppositions or concepts that provide the background constraints within which a certain kind of political life can take place. Liberalism in this sense encompasses many different substantive and often incompatible doctrines of political morality—liberal egalitarianism, libertarianism, and traditional conservatism are all views that can be accommodated within liberalism. One can be a liberal and be for or against abortion, for or against greater redistribution of income and wealth, for or against intervention in the Civil War in Syria, for or against the greater regulation of business, and on either side of any number of hotly contested social, domestic, and foreign policy issues of the day. If we abstract out far enough from these substantive views, however, we can come to a place where there are certain fundamental core principles on which all forms of liberalism agree. In most cases, these fundamental principles are merely general concepts, not particular conceptions, and therefore need further content before they generate specific recommendations for action, which is why liberals can agree on these fundamental principles and still end up on opposing sides of the same issue. But even though these fundamental principles are somewhat vague and indeterminate, they do provide the general background framework within which political debate can take place. And if we were to replace this

framework with some other framework, the shape of that debate would look very different indeed. What is significant about the competing set of fundamental background presuppositions that perfectionists embrace, then, is not that they generate different *answers* to moral problems—this cannot be determined until these background presuppositions are given further content. What is significant is that if we change the nature of our background presuppositions, we change the whole nature of moral discourse—instead of changing the answers, we are changing the *questions*, changing the way we go about determining which questions are subject to moral evaluation and what moral evaluation even means.

III.

Before examining the various fundamental presuppositions on which liberals and perfectionists differ, however, it is important to note that these do not form a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for one to be a liberal or a perfectionist—people can and often do embrace some presuppositions from each list. What this list provides is a way of judging *how* liberal or *how* perfectionist a certain society or political party or person is. The more completely one embraces the presuppositions on one list and rejects those on the other, the closer one is to being a pure or *hard* perfectionist or liberal.^[14] And what Trumpism represents,

we shall see, is a giant step in the hard perfectionist direction. Having said that, the fundamental presuppositions on which liberalism and perfectionism differ are as follows.

Toleration. One of the principal themes running throughout liberalism is toleration—the belief that there are a wide range of reasonable although incompatible comprehensive moral doctrines, conceptions of the good, and plans of life, and that people ought to be free to pursue whichever of these they prefer regardless of whether the path they choose is in their best interests or to the liking of their fellow citizens. To understand what liberals mean by toleration, however, it is important to recognize that toleration is intended to be more than a pragmatic response to the problems that arise when people disagree over what morality requires. For liberals, toleration is supposed to be a moral imperative, not merely a pragmatic one, and therefore requires one to refrain from suppressing attitudes, ideas, and of ways of life with which one disagrees and which one could suppress if one wanted to. Toleration accordingly tries to mark out some territory between a willingness to accept and a desire to suppress that is not occupied by indifference. But perfectionists argue there is no territory here to be claimed. They deny that there are non-instrumental reasons for resisting a desire to suppress that are not also reasons for accepting that to which we object. And they contend that if no such reasons do exist,

then toleration is not a distinct moral attitude that anyone could hold, but simply another way of saying that a plurality of incompatible sets of moral judgments are equally correct or, more nefariously, that *no* set of moral judgments is correct. In the former case, the liberal commitment to toleration reduces to value relativism; in the latter, to value nihilism; but in either case to positions that perfectionists vigorously reject. Of course, liberals claim that toleration is not unlimited—the great liberal philosopher John Rawls, for example, tells us “justice does not require that men must stand idly by while others destroy the basis of their existence”^[15] and thus an intolerant sect has no cause to complain if it is suppressed when this is in accord with principles it would use against others in similar circumstances. But perfectionists see toleration as a formula for self-destruction. Perfectionists argue that the threat posed by the enemies of a political community is almost never clear until it is too late, and therefore government cannot afford to employ suppression only as a last resort. Moreover, a liberal society is likely to be composed of such a diversity of views that it will be difficult for it to deal decisively and effectively with such threats even after they become apparent. This makes toleration not a guarantee of social peace and stability to perfectionists, but an open invitation to evil, one that threatens the long-term sustainability of a community’s preferred way of life. No doubt it is exactly this kind of thinking that lies behind Trump’s argument for the exclusion of Muslims and the

willingness of his supporters to cheer him on for this.[16]

Neutrality. Liberals believe that government should remain neutral in some meaningful sense between whatever reasonable comprehensive moral doctrines, conceptions of the good, and plans of life that its citizens embrace.

Perfectionists, in contrast, believe that neutrality is a mistake. They argue that the combination of tolerance and neutrality means that liberalism is empty—it has no positive program, only permissiveness, and if everything is permitted, how is one to decide what to do? Accordingly, perfectionists believe that one of the essential functions of government is to put forward a comprehensive substantive moral program and thereby encourage citizens to develop the virtues that perfectionists believe are essential to the creation of an ideal society. While values could still be instilled by religious, educational, and cultural institutions, as they are under liberalism, these institutions would not be free to instill *any* set of moral values—they would be free (and in fact would be required) to instill only those values with which the government happens to agree. Hence HB 2 in North Carolina, which attempts to stop members of the larger community from treating LGBT people like everybody else,[17]and the fact that in the wake of Trump's election, notwithstanding the blowback North Carolina has experienced, other states seem prepared to follow suit.[18]

Indeed, for the perfectionist, ensuring that everyone and not just the government advocates only the “correct” set of values is the primary reason for government to exist.

The relative priority of liberty and authority. Liberals are opposed to granting unlimited or absolute authority to the government, although the degree to which government authority should be limited is controversial. Some liberals advocate very strict limits on government power; others believe the government should and indeed must be allowed to regulate a wide variety of human activities. But all liberals attach great importance to negative liberty—the degree to which people are free to pursue their own conceptions of the good free from interference by other human agents, and would allow such interference only when they find compelling moral reasons for doing so. Perfectionists, in contrast, believe in a much stronger central government, and in fewer checks and balances on executive action. Perfectionists attach a higher priority to authority than to liberty because they are most concerned that everyone within their political community embrace a certain set of substantive values, and authority is required to ensure this. And this explains why Trump is a “big-government” conservative, unlike his more traditional conservative predecessors.^[19] Interfering with negative liberty is not a concern for him and his supporters because the liberty to reject this set of substantive values is

not a liberty that perfectionists believe anyone should enjoy. Rather than a conception of negative liberty, perfectionists embrace a conception of positive liberty, the view that people can and should be forced to embrace a certain set of substantive values because only by embracing this precise set of values can people achieve full self-realization and truly be free.

Security and the rule of law. Liberals believe that no one is above the law, and that the law may not be violated even in the most extreme conditions. Perfectionists, in contrast, attach higher priority to security than the rule of law because a perfectionist society always sees itself surrounded by enemies. This is because they see not only liberal societies as enemies, they see other perfectionist societies as enemies as well, for it is highly unlikely that two perfectionist societies will embrace the same set of substantive views. This is how, for example, Trump can support torture, indiscriminate bombing, and killing the families of terrorists, all in violation of established international law,[\[20\]](#) or even consider establishing a registry of American Muslims despite the obvious unconstitutionality of such a provision.[\[21\]](#) But the inversion of our priorities here has another important effect as well—it not only justifies the suspension of long-standing rights, it also immunizes those in power from the control of law. For unlike liberals, perfectionists believe that law is a servant to power,

and that while the governed must obey the law, those in power have the right to rule. Their rule is therefore both good and necessary by definition, and not to be obstructed by law. Indeed, Trump's refusal to divest himself of his business interests and meaningfully address his numerous conflicts of interest recalls Richard Nixon's famous claim that "when the President does it, that means it is not illegal."^[22] According to perfectionists, those in government may violate the law not only in emergency conditions, but also whenever necessary to ensure that their rule and the inherent conception of the good it embodies is not thwarted.

The identity of the fundamental social unit. Liberals believe that the individual is the fundamental social unit. This is not to say that liberals do not also recognize the value of community, or that community is something that government should foster and support. But under liberalism, we value community because we believe this is a necessary background condition for individuals to develop and thrive. In other words, community identity and values are cherished because they are instrumental to the realization of individual identity and values—what liberals commonly call "personal autonomy". Perfectionists, in contrast, believe that the community is the fundamental social unit—that is, that some concept of community, no matter how exclusive, is what

should determine the basic structure and institutions of society, and that individuals may rightly be sacrificed to support this conception of community. For those that hold this view, the community is not an aggregate of individuals; individuals are instantiations of the community. Communities do not derive their identities from the individuals that make them up; individuals derive their identities from the communities of which they are part. The individual is not prior to the community; the community is prior to the individual. This view has a variety of consequences, and one of them is that as the fundamental social unit, the community cannot be deconstructed and re-imagined, it can only be threatened and destroyed. And it can only be threatened and destroyed from the outside, for if one views the community as the fundamental social unit, the concept of dissent has no meaning—there can be no dissent within the community; opposition can only be expressed by those who place themselves outside the community and thereby become its enemies, for those inside the community must by definition hold certain views. Efforts to purge the government bureaucracy of people who may disagree with the policies of the incoming Trump administration can already be seen in the use of “informational” questionnaires sent to the State and Energy departments requesting the identity of current employees that support women’s rights or believe in climate change.^[23] Discussion and compromise is simply off the table—as Sarah Palin warned her fellow Republicans when

some were reluctant to get on board with Donald Trump, “you’re either with us or you’re against us.”[24]

The separation of religious and political authority.

Starting with Spinoza, liberalism has always been hostile to the conflation of religious and political authority. This does not mean that religious leaders should not express their views on the proper interpretation of the Word of God or on the difference between right and wrong—this is indeed appropriate under liberalism. But liberals believe that it is ultimately up to each individual and not some religious figure to decide what is best for his community to do. The concern is that religion should not be used as a means of cutting off debate—the public discussion of political issues should not be sidestepped through the issuance of edicts to the faithful.

Perfectionists, in contrast, believe that religious and governmental authority can, and often, *should* be mixed. For some perfectionists, the connection between religious and political authority is conceptual, the result of a deep commitment to the role of religion in the organization and regulation of political and social life. For others, this conflation of political and religious authority is simply a matter of expediency, a tool for consolidating their political power, and not a consequence of their personal religious views. The forefather of American neo-conservatism Leo Strauss, for example, viewed religion instrumentally, as the

cement that held a community together.^[25] This, I think must be the category into which Trump falls, for it is hard to believe he harbors any sincere religious beliefs. But by railing against what one of his nominees called the “political ideology of Islam,” he managed to secure some 80% of the Christian evangelical vote,^[26] even though many evangelicals did not view him as a religious or even a moral man.^[27]

The role of public discourse and debate. Liberals believe that all members of a political community should have an opportunity to participate in its political decision-making under conditions of full information, and that the purpose of public discourse and debate is to persuade others of the rightness of one’s position by resorting to arguments that one’s opponents could not reasonably reject. While religious education and religious faith can be a basis for personal belief for liberals, it cannot be a tool of public reason, for one cannot reasonably expect the adherents of other religions to accept arguments that are religiously based. Accordingly, what liberals believe in is public education, for this gives all members of a political community the tools necessary to fully participate in democratic society. Not only do perfectionists often resort to religious authority as a tool for cutting off debate, they also embrace the noble lie—Plato’s idea that the common people are incapable of seeing the truth even when it is laid out before them and therefore may be manipulated

and led by falsehoods whenever necessary to do so. For perfectionists of all kinds, public education is dangerous, for it makes the masses less susceptible to manipulation, puts dangerous ideas in their heads, and threatens the elite with both intellectual and economic competition. For example, rather than providing decent public education for everyone, Trump's nominee for Secretary of Education wants to privatize most of it, something which will no doubt ensure that what remains is of appalling quality and that the unemployed and working class are even less prepared to fully participate in [our](#) democracy, much less achieve economic advancement. [\[28\]](#) And while liberals consider the Machiavellian manipulation of the masses a violation of the moral limits on public discourse and debate, perfectionists do not believe that the use of such methods even presents a moral quandary. Under perfectionism, effective instruments of policy are by definition morally acceptable, not because the ends justify the means, but because perfectionists disagree with the view that states of affairs necessarily include the means that were required to produce them. In a world defined by ends, means are simply not subject to moral evaluation. Perfectionists also tend to reject persuasion as an objective of political interaction altogether. They criticize liberals for engaging in "perpetual discussion" when what is required is decisive action. "Values can only be asserted or posited by overcoming others, not by reasoning with them," claims the neo-conservative Allan Bloom,[\[29\]](#) an attitude that was vividly

on display to anyone watching Trump's glowering, blustery, menacing performance in the second presidential debate.^[30] Rather than treat their opponents as individuals to be persuaded, perfectionists treat them as if they were suffering from a disease. One does not deal with people who have a disease by trying to persuade them to get better; one simply does whatever is necessary to eliminate the disease from the body, or in this case the community. For perfectionists, the choice is between conquest and capitulation—opponents must be dominated and defeated, not intellectually engaged and debated.

The relative importance of facts and faith in pure and practical reasoning. Whether it is a consequence of their insistence on strict separation between religious and political authority or a cause, liberals elevate facts over faith in their pure and practical reasoning, for the realm of reason is often the only domain in which different faiths can meet and find a common basis for discussion and agreement. But the liberal commitment to reason is also a consequence of the overall approach that liberals take to understanding their experience of the world. Liberals search for rational, scientific explanations for all phenomena, social as well as natural, and even when this search ends in uncertainty they resist the lure of supernatural explanations and rely on probabilistic reasoning to arrive at decisions about which action or belief is

most appropriate to embrace. Perfectionists, in contrast, distrust reason and the scientific method. “All intellectuals are bad,” the 19th Century French anti-Enlightenment theorist Joseph de Maistre tells us, “but the most dangerous are the natural scientists,”[31] a belief Trump obviously embraces wholeheartedly.[32] Indeed, perfectionists see the scientific method and its corresponding exaltation of reason as a threat to authority, and therefore to stability and order. Truth is to be discovered through faith, whether it be religious faith or faith in “the market” or in a leader who can “Make America Great Again” or in the superiority of one race or gender or in some mythical conception of the American way of life. No matter what the source of the belief, one simply believes and then follows this belief until it is fulfilled—lack of success is not a sign of error but of a lack of competence or commitment. Millions of illegals must have voted for Hillary Clinton, for example, because Trump is the only true way forward and the popular vote could have failed to reflect this only if the results were rigged.[33] Perfectionists simply treat faith-based beliefs as conceptual truths—they are not based on evidence so evidence cannot be used to dislodge them. Evidence can merely confirm these truths or alert us that others must be engaged in some sort of conspiracy to hide the truth from us.

Equality. Liberals believe that people have equal intrinsic

moral worth, regardless of the political community with which they happen to be associated. They also believe that within each political community, everyone's interests are entitled to equal concern and respect, although they may disagree about what equal concern and respect requires. But perfectionists accuse liberals of hypocrisy—they accuse liberals of *claiming* to want a big tent, but allowing no room in their tent for white supremacists, anti-Semites, Islamophobes, misogynists, xenophobes, and so on. But as I said, it is not a violation of tolerance to reject the intolerant—these people would suppress others if they had the chance, and there is nothing in liberalism that requires us to tolerate those who would suppress us. In addition to falsely accusing liberals of hypocrisy, however, perfectionist also deny that all persons have equal intrinsic moral worth, an attitude repeatedly demonstrated by Trump in both his remarks and his appointments.[34] Perfectionists believe that members of their own political community have greater moral worth, and they believe that within their own political community the interests of the elite are entitled to greater concern and respect than the interests of the masses. This does not mean that perfectionists attach no moral significance to the lives of others. Outsiders may indeed be treated as having some moral significance, like animals or pets, or as having instrumental worth. Even some Mexicans, Trump tell us, may be “good people.”[35] But perfectionists do not give the lives of outsiders the same weight in their moral reasoning as they

give the lives of members of their own group and especially the elite.

IV.

With this thick description of liberalism and perfectionism in mind, it is perhaps easier to see why some white people found Trump appealing. Toleration seems incoherent—how can it be morally right to tolerate that which we think is morally wrong, and if we do tolerate wrongdoers how can we ever draw a principled line? Why should government be neutral toward comprehensive conceptions of the good that are different from those that “our” community, however this is defined, happens to embrace, given that ours is by definition the one and only true way? Is not unfettered authority more comforting than the rule of law when the rule of law is simply an obstacle that prevents the righteous from doing what needs doing? Are not myths more comforting than reality, especially in the highly competitive world we live in now, for they offer easy targets and what appear to be easy solutions for one’s suffering? And so on.

But liberalism need not be weak or indecisive—liberalism may take many forms, and if we place limits on the ideas of toleration and neutrality, we can produce a form of liberalism with teeth, one that can defend itself from evil when such a

defense is necessary, but which has the wisdom to see when such a defense is not. Liberalism also need not be morally decadent—non-governmental value generating institutions can be supported without compromising neutrality, and if these institutions are robust, the penetration of these moral values in society should be deeper and more lasting than that achieved by the kind of state coercion that perfectionists would have us use. Without the rule of law, none of us are safe from those in power, whether that power be wielded by the government or by some collection of economic interests. Without facts, our projects and opinions become the servants of whim and prejudice and are unlikely to succeed. And without a commitment to equality, most of us will end up as servants to those whose good luck or looks make them eligible to be masters. Liberals must be careful to live up to their values, and there may be problems here to overcome, but there is no reason to believe that liberalism is any more problematic than perfectionism.

Indeed, it is perfectionism, not liberalism, that presents the greater threat to modern life. Perfectionism is inherently unstable—whatever substantive perfectionist beliefs one begins with, no one is ever perfect, and there is a continuing pressure to define the requisite beliefs of a perfectionist community ever more finely. As these beliefs are more finely defined, however, more and more people are excluded from the community, branded enemies, and attacked, so a

perfectionist society must inevitably implode, like a star, into a black hole where a handful of extremists fight among themselves for the mantle of being the only “true” or “pure” members of the perfectionist community.

Perfectionist communities also have an inherent tendency toward violence. This arises because they insist on treating everyone outside their community as an enemy, for this is built into the way perfectionist communities define themselves. As a result, there is the danger that any perfectionist society will become fanatically obsessed with self-purification and the destruction of outsiders. And if history is any guide, it should be clear that the danger of fanaticism greatly outweighs whatever danger liberalism might present. Yet this is the threat that has now been institutionalized by the election of Donald Trump. We are descending into a dark, horrifying Kafkaesque world, where everything is corrupt, dissent is dangerous, facts don't matter, wealth, power, fame, strength, beauty and success are considered good no matter how they are obtained, and the only thing that is predictable is that things are likely to end very, very, badly indeed.

Footnotes & References

[1] See also Jamelle Bouie, “There’s No Such Thing as a Good Trump Voter,” *Slate* (November 15, 2016); Romaisaa Benzizoune, “I’m Muslim, but my Roommate Supports

Trump,” *The New York Times* (November 11, 2016).

[2] See David Smith, “Trump’s Billionaire Cabinet Could Be the Richest Ever,” *The Guardian* (December 2, 2016); Nomi Prins, “Trump’s Great Gatsby Government Will Be a Gift to the Rich,” *The Guardian* (December 2, 2016); George Monbiot, “Frightened by Donald Trump? You Don’t Know the Half of It,” *The Guardian* (November 30, 2016).

[3] See Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Trump’s Promises Will Be Hard to Keep, but Coal Country Has Faith,” *The New York Times* (November 28, 2016).

[4] See generally Paul Krugman, “Seduced and Betrayed by Donald Trump,” *The New York Times* (December 2, 2016); David Leonhardt, “Trump’s Flip-Flop on Taxes,” *The New York Times* (December 1, 2016); Paul Krugman, “Build He Won’t,” *The New York Times* (November 21, 2016); Josh Bivens and Hunter Blair, “Trump’s Infrastructure Plan Is Not a Simple Public-Private Partnership Plan, and Won’t Lead to Much New Investment,” *Economic Policy Institute* (November 22, 2016); Neil Irwin, “Why the Trump Team’s Economic Promises Will Be Hard to Execute,” *The New York Times* (November 30, 2016); Paul Krugman, “How Many People Just Voted Themselves Out of Health Care? (Updated) (Updated Again) (And Again),” *The New York Times* (November 29, 2016); Steven Greenhouse, “What Unions Got Wrong about Trump,” *The New York Times* (November

26, 2016); Howard Gleckman, “Latest Trump Tax Plan Adds Trillions to the National Debt, Clinton Plan Trims Deficits by Taxing the Wealthy,” *Tax Policy Center* (October 11, 2016) (<http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxvox/latest-trump-tax-plan-adds-trillions-national-debt-clinton-plan-trims-deficits-taxing-wealthy>).

[5] See Rupert Neate, “Trump’s Tax Plan: Massive Cuts for the 1% Will Usher ‘Era of Dynastic Wealth,’” *The Guardian* (November 23, 2016).

[6] In addition to the surge in hate crimes caused by what we might call the “Trump effect,” see Mazim Sidahmed, “Trump’s Election Led to ‘Barrage of Hate,’ Report Finds,” *The Guardian* (November 29, 2016); Trump’s endorsement of the nationwide use of “Stop and Frisk,” combined with his promise deport millions of undocumented workers, cannot help but eventually provoke widespread street protests. See Jim Dwyer, “What Donald Trump Got Wrong About Stop-and-Frisk,” *The New York Times* (September 27, 2016)(noting that 90% of the people stopped in New York under Stop and Frisk have been black and Latino men).

[7] See Claire Malone, “Clinton Couldn’t Win Over White Women,” *FiveThirtyEight* (November 9, 2016) (<http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/clinton-couldnt-win-over-white-women/>).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid. See also Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “The Women Who Helped Donald Trump to Victory,” *The New York Times* (November 10, 2016); Lois Beckett, Rory Carroll, Carmen Fishwick, Amber Jamieson, and Sam Thielman, “The Real ‘Shy Trump’ Vote—How 53% of White Women Pushed Him to Victory,” *The Guardian* (November 10, 2016).

[10] See Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Labor Statistics from the Current Population Survey (Seasonally Adjusted),” Table A-4, United States Department of Labor (<https://www.bls.gov/web/empstat/cpseea04.htm>).

[11] See Eileen Patten, “Racial, Gender Wage Gaps Persist in U.S. Despite Some Progress,” *Pew Research Center* (July 1, 2016) (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/01/racial-gender-wage-gaps-persist-in-u-s-despite-some-progress/>).

[12] See Paul Krugman, “The Populism Perplex,” *The New York Times* (November 25, 2016; Michael Grunwald, “The Victory of ‘No’,” *Politico* (December 4, 2016).

[13] See Derek Thompson, “The Dangerous Myth that Hillary Clinton Ignored the Working Class,” *The Atlantic* (December 5, 2016).

[14] From here on I draw heavily from, but have updated, Mark R. Reiff, “The Attack on Liberalism,” in *Law and Philosophy*, ed. Michael Freeman and Ross Harrison (Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 173-210.

[15] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, rev. ed. 1999), p. 192.

[16] See Amy Davidson, “Donald Trump’s Crowd Cheers His Muslim Exclusion Plan,” *The New Yorker* (December 8, 2015).

[17] See Katie Zezima, “‘Not about Bathrooms’: Critics Decry North Carolina Law’s Lesser Known Elements,” *The Washington Post* (May 14, 2016).

[18] See Tom Dart, “Texas Looks Set to Follow North Carolina with Push for ‘Bathroom Bill’,” *The Guardian* (January 1, 2017).

[19] See Jeffrey Rosen, “States’ Rights for the Left,” *The New York Times* (December 3, 2016).

[20] See James Risen, “Trump Said ‘Torture Works.’ An Echo Is Feared Worldwide.” *The New York Times* (January 5, 2017); Tom Lister, “Is Bombing the S*** out of ISIS a Strategy?” *CNN* (November 15, 2016); Tom LoBianco, “Donald Trump on Terrorists: ‘Take Out Their Families’,” *CNN* (December 2, 2015).

[21] See Aaron Blake, “Trump Says We’ve Known His Muslim Ban and Database Plans ‘All Along.’ But We Still Don’t—Not Really” *Washington Post* (December 21, 2016)

[22] See Julian Borger, “‘A Recipe for Scandal:’ Trump Conflicts of Interest Point to Constitutional Crisis,” *The Guardian* (November 27, 2016).

[23] See Coral Davenport, “Climate Change Conversations Are Targeted in Questionnaire to Energy Department,” *The New York Times* (December 9, 2016); Mark Landler, “Transition Team’s Request on Gender Equality Rattles State Dept.,” *The New York Times* (December 22, 2016).

[24] Nick Gass, “Palin Rips Never Trump Republicans: ‘You Are either with Us or against US’,” *Politico* (July 1, 2016).

[25] See Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 37.

[26] See Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne, “The Evangelicalism of Old White Men Is Dead,” *The New York Times* (November 29, 2016).

[27] The explanation offered by one of Trump’s evangelical supporters for their willingness to ignore his obvious moral and religious failings was that, “God [sometimes uses] unjust people to do his will.” See Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Trump’s Promises Will Be Hard to Keep, but Coal Country Has Faith.”

[28] See Katherine Stewart, “Betsy DeVos and God’s Plan for Schools,” *The New York Times* (December 13, 2016).

[29] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), at p. 202.

[30] See Charles M. Blow, “Donald Trump, Barbarian at the Debate,” *The New York Times* (October 10, 2016).

[31] See Isaiah Berlin, Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 91-174, 119.

[32] See Lawrence M. Krauss, “Donald Trump’s War on Science,” *The New Yorker* (December, 13, 2016).

[33] See Edward Helmore, “Trump Claims ‘Millions Voted Illegally’ but Offers No Evidence,” *The Guardian* (November 28, 2106). For examples of other self-serving beliefs held by Trump or at least a large portion of his supporters despite the complete lack of evidence to support them and, in most cases, the existence of overwhelming evidence to rebut them, see Nicholas Kristof, “Lies in the Guise of News in the Trump Era,” *The New York Times* (November 12, 2016).

[34] See for example, Trump’s appointment of Steve Bannon as chief White House strategist, an enormously influential post, and the nomination of Jeff Sessions for Attorney General, both of whom have been associated with racists acts and remarks. See Editorial Board, “Steve ‘Turn On the Hate’ Bannon, in the White House,” *The New York Times* (November 15, 2016); Emily Bazelon, “The Voter Fraud Case

Jeff Sessions Lost and Can't Escape," *The New York Time Magazine* (January 9, 2017).

[35] See Alexander Burns, "Choice Words from Donald Trump, Presidential Candidate," *The New York Times* (June 16, 2015).



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