

*The*  
DEATH  
*of* ADAM

*Essays on Modern Thought*

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## THE TYRANNY OF PETTY COERCION

COURAGE SEEMS TO ME to be dependent on cultural definition. By this I do not mean only that it is a word that blesses different behaviors in different cultures, though that is clearly true. I mean also, and more importantly, that courage is rarely expressed except where there is sufficient consensus to support it. Theologians used to write about a prevenient grace, which enables the soul to accept grace itself. Perhaps there must also be a prevenient courage to nerve one to be brave. It is we human beings who give one another permission to show courage, or, more typically, withhold such permission. We also internalize prohibitions, enforcing them on ourselves—prohibitions against, for example, expressing an honest doubt, or entertaining one. This ought not to be true in a civilization like ours, historically committed to valuing individual conscience and free expression. But it is.

Physical courage is remarkably widespread in this population. There seem always to be firefighters to deal with the most appalling conflagrations and doctors to deal with the most

novel and alarming illnesses. It is by no means to undervalue courage of this kind to say it is perhaps expedited by being universally *recognized* as courage. Those who act on it can recognize the impulse and act confidently, even at the greatest risk to themselves.

Moral and intellectual courage are not in nearly so flourishing a state, even though the risks they entail — financial or professional disadvantage, ridicule, ostracism — are comparatively minor. I propose that these forms of courage suffer from the disadvantage of requiring new definitions continually, which must be generated out of individual perception and judgment. They threaten or violate loyalty, group identity, the sense of *comme il faut*. They are, intrinsically, outside the range of consensus.

Social comity is no doubt dependent on a degree of like-mindedness in a population. It does sometimes help when we are in general agreement about basic things. Indeed, consensus is so powerful and so effectively defended that I suspect it goes back to earliest humanity, when our tribes were small and vulnerable, and schism and defection were a threat to survival. But it should never be forgotten how much repression and violence consensus can support, or how many crimes it has justified.

It is true that in most times and places physical courage and moral and intellectual courage have tended to merge, since dungeons, galleys, and stakes have been extensively employed in discouraging divergent viewpoints. For this reason our own society, which employs only mild disincentives against them and in theory positively admires them, offers a valuable opportunity for the study of what I will call the conservation of consensus, that is, the effective enforcement of consensus in those many instances where neither reason nor data endorse it, where there are no legal constraints supporting it, and where there are no penalties for challenging it that persons of even moderate brio would consider deterrents.

Let us say that the sort of courage I wish to consider can be defined as loyalty to truth. I am not entering any epistemological thicket here. The kind of truth that interests me is of the type sometimes represented in the statement “the house is on fire.” It is consensus that conceals from us what is objectively true. And it is consensus that creates and supports “truths” that are in fact culturally relative. And, interestingly, it is consensus that is preserved when the objective truth is disallowed on the grounds that “truth” is merely the shared understanding of a specific group or culture.

Here is an instance: for some time the word “bashing” has been used to derail criticism of many kinds, by treating as partisan or tendentious statements that are straightforwardly true or false. To say that the disparity between rich and poor in this country exceeds any previously known in American history (putting aside the marked economic disparity between plantation owners and slaves) is to say something falsifiable — that is, for practical purposes, verifiable, and in any case arguable. But such statements are now routinely called “Bush bashing.” In other words, something that is objectively true or false is dismissed as the slur of a hostile subgroup. Perfectly sensible people flinch at the thought that they might sound a trifle Jacobin, and they are shamed out of saying what they believe to be true in the plainest sense of the word “true.” Nor is it the critics alone who lose their bearings when these strategies are employed. Those who identify with the group toward whom the criticisms are directed — in this case, the present administration — can hear irrational attack where they might otherwise hear a challenge to their values or to their theories and methods.

So the exchanges that political life entirely depends on, in which people attempt in good conscience to establish practical truth and then candidly assign value to it, simply do not take place. This is a failure of courage on both sides. I assume many

apologists for the administration would find it painful to say that radical economic polarization is a good thing. So they are relieved to learn that they are only being "bashed," and therefore need not consider the issue on its merits.

Why critics are so flummoxed I can only speculate. Perhaps it is because most of the people in this country who take on public issues are educated and middle class. As is true of their kind anywhere, they are acculturated to distrust strong emotion, so they are effectively rebuked when they are accused of harboring it. Oddly, they seem often to be shamed out of defending the poor and vulnerable on the grounds that they themselves are neither poor nor vulnerable, as if there were properly no abstract issues of justice, only the strategies of interest groups or, more precisely, of self-interest groups. That their education and experience prepare them to think in terms larger than their own immediate advantage makes them an "elite," and ipso facto they are regarded as a self-interested subgroup of a particularly irksome kind. Even when they benefit, materially, from the policies they deplore and wish to change, their position is dismissed as nothing more than elitist, though the pols and pollsters who use the term have identical credentials and much greater power. To be intimidated in this way is a failure of courage, and to abandon democracy from an excess of self-doubt and good manners is no different, in its effect, than to abandon it out of arrogance or greed.

I am myself a liberal. By that I mean I believe society exists to nurture and liberate the human spirit, and that large-mindedness and openhandedness are the means by which these things are to be accomplished. I am not ideological. By that I mean I believe opportunities of every kind should be seized upon to advance the well-being of people, especially in assuring them decent wages, free time, privacy, education, and health care, concerns essential to their full enfranchisement.

I am very critical of liberalism, not in principle but as a movement. This distinction seems never to be made, and it is not at all subtle. As a principle, liberalism is essential to the sanity and humanity of this civilization. As a movement, it is virtually defunct. Those who have espoused it have failed it, in a way and to a degree that has allowed the very word to become a term of opprobrium. Some authoritative consensus turned against it, and, obedient to that consensus, its allies have abandoned the cause, if not gone over to the other side, into the embrace of illiberalism. The oddness as well as the potency of this phenomenon is certainly to be seen in the capitulation of the Democratic Party in Congress to a president whose mandate to govern was so weak as to be nonexistent. These solons were cowed not so much by being out of power as by being out of style. Perhaps so honorable a thing as courage should not be named in such a context, even to describe its own absence.

In all fairness, the capitulation of liberalism to illiberalism (a word I use advisedly — there is nothing conservative about this new politics) occurred along the whole broad progressive front, not just in Congress. Suddenly people were avoiding the word, trying to find a new name for their political convictions and failing, in part because they were not quite sure what their convictions were, or if they ought to deal in politics at all. Best leave it to the cynics and the bullies.

It is sad to consider how much first-rate courage must be devoted in this world to struggling out of the toils of sheer pettiness. The Saudi women who first drove automobiles risked and suffered penalties, overcame inhibitions, and shattered norms, heroic in their defiance of an absurd convention. We have our own Rosa Parks. That such great courage should have been required to challenge such petty barriers is a demonstration of the power of social consensus. How many minor coer-

cions are required to sustain similar customs and usages? How aware are any of us, absent direct challenge, of how we also deal in trivial coercion?

This is a time when it actually requires a certain courage to declare oneself a liberal, even among presumptively like-minded people. That might seem a minor act after the instances I have just cited, in which people defied prejudice, custom, and law. But the purely arbitrary nature of this little coercion isolates the impulse to enforce consensus, even when absolutely nothing is at stake for the enforcers and the one subject to coercion risks no penalty — except the embarrassment of seeming not to know that a word is *passé*, that a posture is, well, as of now a little ridiculous. A great part of learning the argot of a peer group, which is a great part of claiming and assuming membership in it, is the self-editing that deletes disfavored language. All of us learn this skill in adolescence — learn it so well, perhaps, that we practice it unconsciously through life. This editing reaches deeper than mere language, and of course there is no such thing as mere language. The banishment of the word “liberal” was simultaneous with the collapse of liberalism itself. And however these events were related, the patient smile that precludes conversation on the subject means the matter is closed. To be shamed out of the use of a word is to make a more profound concession to opinion than is consistent with personal integrity. What is at stake? Our hope for a good community. Liberalism saw to the well-being of the vulnerable. Now that it has ebbed, the ranks of the vulnerable continuously swell. If this seems too great a claim to make for it, pick up a newspaper. Trivial failures of courage may seem minor enough in any particular instance, and yet they change history and society. They also change culture.

To illustrate this point, I will make a shocking statement: I

am a Christian. This ought not to startle anyone. It is likely to be at least demographically true of an American of European ancestry. I have a strong attachment to the Scriptures, and to the theology, music, and art Christianity has inspired. My most inward thoughts and ponderings are formed by the narratives and traditions of Christianity. I expect them to engage me on my deathbed.

Over the years many a good soul has let me know by one means or another that this living out of the religious/ethical/aesthetic/intellectual tradition that is so essentially compelling to me is not, shall we say, cool. There are little jokes about being born again. There are little lectures about religion as a cheap cure for existential anxiety. Now, I do feel fairly confident that I know what religion is. I have spent decades informing myself about it, an advantage I can claim over any of my would-be rescuers. I am a mainline Protestant, a.k.a. a liberal Protestant, as these same people know. I do not by any means wear my religion on my sleeve. I am extremely reluctant to talk about it at all, chiefly because my belief does not readily reduce itself to simple statements.

Nevertheless, I experience these little coercions. Am I the last one to get the news that this religion that has so profoundly influenced world civilization over centuries has been ceded to the clods and the obscurantists? Don't I know that J. S. Bach and Martin Luther King have been entirely eclipsed by Jerry Falwell? The question has been put to me very directly: Am I not afraid to be associated with religious people? These nudges would have their coercive effect precisely *because* those who want to put me right know that I am not a fundamentalist. That is, I am to avoid association with religion completely or else be embarrassed by punitive association with beliefs I do not hold. What sense does that make? What good does it serve? I suspect it

demonstrates the existence of a human herding instinct. After all, "egregious" means at root "outside the flock." There are always a great many people who are confident that they recognize deviation from group mores, and so they police the boundaries and round up the strays.

This is only one instance of a very pervasive phenomenon, a pressure toward concessions no one has a right to ask. These are concessions courage would refuse if it were once acknowledged that a minor and insidious fear is the prod that coaxes us toward conforming our lives, and even our thoughts, to norms that are effective markers of group identity precisely because they are shibboleths, a contemporary equivalent of using the correct fork. These signals of inclusion and exclusion, minor as they seem, have huge consequences historically because they are used to apportion the benefits and the burdens of collective life. The example of coercion I have offered, the standing invitation to sacrifice one's metaphysics to one's sense of *comme il faut*, has had the effect of marginalizing the liberal churches and elevating fundamentalism to the status of essential Christianity. The consequences of handing over the whole of Christianity to one momentarily influential fringe is clearly borne out in the silencing of social criticism and the collapse of social reform, both traditionally championed by American mainline churches, as no one seems any longer to remember.

The present dominance of aspersion and ridicule in American public life is a reflex of the fact that we are assumed to want, and in many cases perhaps do want, attitude much more than information. If an unhealthy percentage of the population gets its news from Jay Leno or Rush Limbaugh, it is because they are arbiters of attitude. They instruct viewers as to what, within their affinity groups, it is safe to say and cool to think. That is, they

short-circuit the functions of individual judgment and obviate the exercise of individual conscience. So it is to a greater or lesser degree with the media in general. It is painful to watch decent and distinguished people struggle to function politically in this non-rational and valueless environment.

Finally, granting that consensus enforcement, and the endless small concessions made to endless small coercions, are no doubt universal in human civilization, they cannot be without cost, precisely because they disable courage. No one can truly submit to unreasonable coercion — by suppressing one's thinking, one's identity, one's metaphysics — without falling a little in one's own estimation. And no one can deal in coercion without cynicism. Both sides of the transaction compromise.

Cultures commonly employ the methods of cults, making their members subject and dependent. And nations at intervals march lockstep to enormity and disaster. A successful autocracy rests on the universal failure of individual courage. In a democracy, abdications of conscience are never trivial. They demoralize politics, debilitate candor, and disrupt thought.