

# What the World Needs Now

## Why Liberalism is the Only Solution to Humanity's Woes

By  
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I want to begin with an unusual take on Western philosophy that is entirely my own. I know of no other philosophers who have said anything similar and can't think of any who would agree with me. To the contrary, I imagine most philosophers would strongly disagree, which probably means I am wrong. Nonetheless, my thesis is this: *Much of what has long been considered and taught as philosophy emerged in reaction against philosophy and should be considered its antithesis.*

I don't want to go too deeply into this provocative claim now, yet to understand the history of liberalism and historical resistances to it, it is helpful to know how frequently and continuously it has been countered by the emergence of illiberal schools of thought that have overshadowed and stalled its promise and progress. Nevertheless, these illiberal and antithetical schools of thought came to be included among the many ideas we now count as philosophy.

The very first of these anti-philosophers was none other than Socrates who, for many, is counted among the greatest of philosophers. I can hear the entire philosophical world shrieking at the very suggestion that he of all people should not be considered a philosopher. Yet the demarcation between Socrates and what philosophy was considered before him is made clear in the teaching of philosophy itself. Every philosopher before Socrates, the originators of philosophy, the first philosophers, are called "presocratic" because of how significantly Socrates diverged from them.

The early philosophers, beginning with Thales of Miletus, born in Asia Minor roughly 2,600 years ago, were the first thinkers we know of who attempted to explain how the world works in natural rather than supernatural terms. Using math, astronomy, and experimentation, Thales and other presocratic philosophers came up with elemental, atomic, evolutionary, and heliocentric theories about nature and the universe, and discovered things like musical octaves, irrational numbers, meteorology, certain medical breakthroughs, and scientific experimentation. This is why Aristotle later referred to these earliest philosophers as *phusikoi*, "the physicists." So extraordinary and unprecedented were they that philosopher Bertrand Russell once said, "The rise of Greek civilization which produced this outburst of intellectual activity is one of the most spectacular events in history. Nothing like it has ever occurred before or since."<sup>1</sup>

Most importantly, for our purposes here, is to understand that for these early philosophers to have discovered so much, they had to believe they could. They had to believe, that is, in their own human agency and ability to reason. They had to believe they did not need the gods, nor authorities, not dictums to understand the world, but that they could figure it out for themselves. And it is this positive attitude toward human agency and human reason that is the seed from which liberalism sprouts, rooted in its first principle, human dignity.

This is not to suggest that Socrates was antihuman. He was clearly a very wise and thoughtful figure whose ideas deserve to be considered and put into practice. He is to be contrasted from the

early philosophers, however, because he turned away from their focus on physics and matter. Socrates turned his interests inward. “Know thyself,” he said, and “The unconsidered life is not worth living.” While still a young man he turned his attention away from physics to ethics because of the former’s fruitless “quest to know reality,” which he called, “a waste of energy when the far more important question of ‘how one should live’ goes unanswered.”<sup>2</sup> Socrates didn’t want to understand the natural world but wanted to achieve moral excellence and know what it takes to live “the good life.” In this sense, he might be better considered a pop-psychologist or self-help guru than a philosopher.

Plato, who introduces us to historical Socrates in his early writings, and later uses him as a rhetorical device to espouse his own ideas, diverged so far from the presocratic philosophers that he discounted the natural realm altogether, claiming that a non-physical realm of perfect Forms ought to be considered true reality. Despite this idealism, which has nothing to do with the thinking of the first philosophers, Plato’s remains a household name, though most would be hard pressed to name a single presocratic philosopher.

After Plato came the great Aristotle, still in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, who righted the ship again by emphasizing physics and reason. Historian A.C. Grayling begins his chapter on Aristotle by saying, “If Aristotle were alive today he would be a scientist, and most likely a biologist; he would have a lively interest in scientific method and logic.”<sup>3</sup> Like the first philosophers, Aristotle, the creator of formal logic, the principles of which have lasted to this day, highly valued our ability to reason, so much so that he considered it our defining quality. Thus, the secret of our happiness, he thought, “is to live up to that thing which is distinctive and defining of humanity, namely, the possession of reason.”<sup>4</sup>

But after Aristotle the Cynics, Stoics and Epicureans emerged and, inspired by Socrates, reemphasized developing guidelines for living a good and ethical life. Until then, philosopher William Irvine says, “philosophers were primarily interested in explaining the world around them—and the phenomenon of that world—in doing what we would now call science.”<sup>5</sup> But, as the Roman stoic Epictetus said, “What do I care whether all existing things are composed of atoms, or of indivisibilities, or of fire and earth? Is it not enough to learn the true nature of the good and the evil?”<sup>6</sup>

This, again, is not say that Cynicism, Stoicism, Epicureanism,<sup>7</sup> and the wisdom of Socrates aren’t valuable means of coping with life, but their goal of living a good and happy life is entirely different than the presocratic goal of understanding the natural world and how it works. Yet, as philosopher W.J. Oates writes, at least “In its earlier stages the orientation of philosophy was to the external world.”<sup>8</sup> In this respect, especially knowing that Socrates, the Cynics, Stoics, and Epicureans largely avoided the abstractions of the first philosophers, it is fair to say their thinking was antithetical, and it is difficult understand how two things so different can be called by the same name—philosophy.

I won’t go much more into the history of philosophy here but want to consider what I’ve already said to illustrate what I consider a back and forth between philosophy’s original emphasis and

various ideological reactions against it, all of which, oddly, are called philosophy. Just prior to the Christian era, the Skeptics and Sophists also emerged who, respectively, denied that human beings can obtain knowledge, even through reason, and that we can, therefore, use fallacious reasoning to argue anything we wish is true. When Christianity became dominant in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, almost all philosophy was considered heresy and paganism. An estimated ninety percent of the works of Antiquity were destroyed because of this hostility. Neoplatonism became the dominant mindset, which lent itself well to a religion obsessed with having the right ideas and perfection in non-material Heaven rather than with hard facts and physical reality.

The Roman Catholic Church dominated western society for nearly a millennium until the Reformation weakened its stronghold. Once some were able to question its doctrines and challenge its authority, the Renaissance began in the 1300s. *Renaissance*, which means “renewal,” was named so for the rediscovery and renewed interest in the presocratic philosophers, particularly their approach to understanding. With this came a renewed appreciation for humanity, human agency, human reason, and human dignity, and a recognition that individuals should be free to determine and express their own beliefs, and that societies must be tolerant of ideological differences.

This is the attitude that spread and flourished during the Enlightenment period in the sixteen and seventeen hundreds. The Enlightenment philosophy, rooted in the proto-scientific thinking of the presocratic philosophers 2,600 years ago, can be summarized as a belief in human dignity that results in freedom, reason, and tolerance. **Freedom** means every person must be free to think and speak for themselves and to choose their own purposes and meaning in life. **Reason** means every person has the capacity to think and consider the empirical evidence before them in their pursuit of truth and understanding. Ideological dictums and religious dogmas should not be imposed upon them. And **Tolerance** means every person, regardless of their specific ideologies and identities, should have equal standing and equal access to the benefits and protections of society.

When these are a society’s overarching principles, it progresses. When not, it doesn’t. We’ve already seen all that was accomplished by the presocratic philosophers once they were able to explore the physical world on its own terms, free from superstition and dogma. Yet, after the presocratic era, when philosophical naval gazing began, followed by the advent of the Holy Roman Empire and its dogmatism, little to no progress was made for more than a thousand years. It wasn’t until the Renaissance, precipitated by the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, that dogma lost its hold, communication became rampant, and society necessarily became more curious and tolerant as result. This mindset flourished during the Enlightenment period in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, leading to a century of unprecedented advances in the 19<sup>th</sup>. As the Unitarian Humanist minister, John Dietrich put it, “it was this movement of liberalism which marks the nineteenth century as the most remarkable period of human history. In fact, the nineteenth century did more to add to the sum total of human life than all the other centuries of the Christian era put together.”<sup>9</sup>

For those who weren’t around during the 1800s, the Canadian scientist and distinguished professor emeritus of Manitoba University, Vaclav Smil explains it well in his 2020 book, *Numbers*

*Don't Lie.* Some might think the 21<sup>st</sup> century has had the most profound inventions in history, but not so according to Smil, because “most recent advances have been variations of two older fundamental discoveries: microprocessors and exploiting radio waves,”<sup>10</sup> which occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “In fact,” Smil says, “perhaps the most inventive time in human history was the 1880s. That’s when electricity became a household commodity thanks to the invention of thermal- and hydropower generation stations that still provide 80 percent of the world’s electricity.<sup>11</sup> It’s also when the first electromagnetic waves were discovered, leading to the first wireless communications technology—the radio. Electric irons, multistory steel skyscrapers, the steam turbine, coin operated vending machines, the four-stroke combustion engine, elevators, revolving doors, electric street cars, electric motors, cash registers, x-rays, ultraviolet light, infrared radiation, microwaves, chain driven bicycles, and other inventions our lives and technology still depend upon today, were all discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, immediately following the Enlightenment’s Age of Reason.

The Enlightenment also led to significant social revolutions. It was the Enlightenment principles—freedom, reason, and tolerance, rooted in human dignity—that led the framers of the U.S. Constitution to fashion our fragile Democracy. And what happened less than a century later, also in the 1800s? The Civil War, a battle to correct what was not accomplished with the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, ending the scourge of slavery. According to political scientist Francis Fukuyama, this occurred in part because of the Enlightenment’s “notion that all human beings are equal in dignity or worth despite their evident natural and social differences,”<sup>12</sup> and because of this, “Slaves were becoming empowered through increasing consciousness of their own worth.”<sup>13</sup>

German philosopher Heinrich Treitschke once said, “everything new that the nineteenth century created is the work of liberalism.”<sup>14</sup> And, Fukuyama says the same is true in general, “Historically, liberal societies have been engines of economic growth, creators of new technologies, and producers of vibrant art and culture. This occurred precisely *because* they were liberal.”<sup>15</sup> But this hasn’t happened by magic but because the tenants of liberalism allow individuals the freedom to explore new ideas, and to use their own minds to interpret empirical facts in order to discover and create, and to do so in a society that tolerates different and new ways of understanding and being in the world. This is why these are the only principles by which a society can make genuine social, economic, and technological advances.

Yet each time we get close to establishing a healthy and genuinely liberal society, its antithesis emerges to thwart us. For the first philosophers it was, oddly enough, Socrates’s introspection and Plato’s idealism that subjugated them to merely being “presocratic,” an incidental footnote in the history of philosophy before it really began. Aristotle briefly got us back on track with his emphasis on logic and science, but his ideas were also subsumed by the Cynical, Stoic, and Epicurean, self-help gurus, along with those who were skeptical that any truth could known and those who exploited such uncertainty to make anything they wanted sound true.

Whenever Materialist and Empiricist philosophies emerged, holding that matter (physics) is the fundamental nature or reality and that truth is derived from sensory experience, they were met by

rationalists and skeptics who argued truth is derived by thought, *cogito ergo sum*, “I think therefore I am,” and that it is not possible to know objective truth. A.C. Grayling says one of the “earliest opponents of the Enlightenment” itself was Romanticism. The “Romantics,” he says, “asserted instead the primacy of emotion over reason, and accordingly celebrated the subjective, the personal, the visionary, and the irrational. They gave a privileged place to moods and passions as sources of insight and as arbiters of truth.”<sup>16</sup>

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and start of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, philosophers like pragmatist John Dewey, logician and mathematician Bertrand Russell, and humanist John Dietrich, restored philosophy to its presocratic roots, only to have these sensibilities challenged again with the emergence of Postmodernism, the rejection of science and empiricism and the notion that there is no such things as objective truth or a common human nature. All truth is subjective, and any belief is just as good as another. And today Wokeism is but the latest incarnation of Idealism, Romanticism, Rationalism, Postmodernism, and so forth: a rejection of objective facts and empirical experience in favor of anyone’s subjective beliefs and lived experience.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, liberalism is additionally despised by conservatism, which seeks to slow or altogether halt progress, and neoliberalism, the belief that governments should have no power to regulate or tax organizations. True liberalism, on the other hand, accepts governments are necessary to protect the rights of individuals within a democratic framework. Nationalism, communism, and authoritarianism are also current antithetical challenges to liberalism.

All of this is to say that liberalism is currently in peril, which means humanity is in peril, because we cannot live in peace together, overcome our greatest challenges together, or make progress together without the only tools that have ever enabled us to do so—recognizing human dignity resulting in societies that are necessarily based upon freedom, reason, and tolerance. Today those on both the extreme Right and Left prefer to silence and demonize those they disagree with, uplift subjective experience and alternative facts as objective truth, and are as uncivil toward as they are intolerant of others.

This is why liberalism must survive and come to thrive again, because it is the only philosophy that can unite our society and our species in order for us to make the next giant leap forward so that, perhaps, some wise person in the future can look back and say of our time, “It was this movement of liberalism which marks the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the most remarkable period of human history.”

Whether we call ideologies antithetical to liberalism “philosophy” or not, liberalism is the only ideology that has proven to advance human welfare and individual worth, always trudging against similar currents of resistance that deny reason, and physics, and objective truths, but succeeds, nonetheless. Despite renewed political, religious, and social forces that renounce hard reality and scientific facts, and that prevent progress, liberalism has proven to have staying power and its principles continually recur to bring tangible hope and meaningful improvement to our existence.

Today liberalism is ridiculed, demeaned, mischaracterized, by those on both the Left and the Right of things, and has become misunderstood by most as a result of all the negativity and bad press. Even many of us who are profoundly liberal in our spirits cannot articulate what it means and are

reluctant to use the word to describe ourselves and our values. But its definition and values are easy to articulate and to recall, “Liberalism is a belief in human dignity that results in greater freedom, reason, and tolerance.” If this simple sentence describes you and what you most value, then you are a liberal. And I hope you are, because our confused and divided world needs liberals and needs to become liberal, now more than ever.

<sup>1</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *The Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., Rathbone Books Limited, London, 1959, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Grayling, A.C., *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Grayling, A.C., *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Irvine, William B., *A Guide to the Good Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Stockdale, James B., *The Stoic Warrior’s Triad: Tranquility, Fearlessness, and Freedom*, A lecture to the student body of the Marine Amphibian Warfare School, Quantico, VA, April 18, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> It could be argued that Epicureanism emerged in reaction to Cynicism and Stoicism in its emphasis on understanding the material world but, like the others, its greater emphasis was on understanding how to live the best kind of life.

<sup>8</sup> Oates, W.J., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, Random House, New York, NY, 1940, p. xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich, John H., “What Is a Liberal?”, *What if the World Went Humanist: Ten Sermons*, Fellowship of Religious Humanists, Yellow Springs, OH, 1989, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Smil, Vaclav, *Numbers Don’t Lie*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2021, p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order* (pp. 323-324). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>14</sup> Dietrich, ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, *Liberalism and its Discontents*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2022, p. 138.

<sup>16</sup> Grayling, ibid., p. 274.