Democracy is a form of government in which the people hold the supreme power rather than a single person or a few privileged elites. Throughout history, this form of government has come in many different sizes and shapes, but most have been short-lived and relatively powerless. Among the ancient Greeks, democracies flourished in Athens and a few other city-states during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and then permanently disappeared after they were overthrown by foreign conquerors. During the Italian Renaissance, democracies or small republics were established in Florence and other cities but were dissolved after brief periods by factionalism. More enduring democratic traditions were established by the Swiss cantons and Dutch republics, though they played a minor role in world history. (On the whole, the ancient democracies and the republics of the free city-states have been weak and transient phenomena compared to the kings and emperors who ruled the world.)

In the past few centuries, however, a new species of democracy has appeared—modern liberal democracy—that has changed the course of history and made the democratic form of government the most powerful in the world. It arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries among the nations of Western Europe and America by advancing new ideas of freedom and equality that challenged the old regimes of absolute monarchy, aristocracy, and theocracy. By the end of the nineteenth century, the successes of liberal democracy over its
ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRACY

In order to see the distinctive claims of modern liberal democracy it is useful to compare it with democracy in the ancient world. Such comparisons have been a major theme of political philosophy and historiography. In the ancient Greek world, citizenship and participation in political decision-making were considered essential to the good life. Athenian citizens, and another 200,000 were noncitizens, were active in the assembly where every citizen could speak and vote. A relatively small citizen-state, which included many citizens, participated directly in political deliberations and held office through frequent elections. Citizenship was reserved for adult males of Athenian parentage, which meant that only about 30,000 inhabitants were eligible for citizenship.

In ancient China, democracy was understood as a moral virtue, not a political institution. The Chinese state was a theocracy, with the ruler believed to be the direct descendant of Heaven. The ruler's authority was absolute, and there was no concept of popular sovereignty. The Confucian ideal of the ruler was one who ruled by virtue, not by force. This contrasted sharply with the democratic ideal of the good ruler, who governed by the will of the people.

The ancient Chinese state was characterized by a strong central government, with a ruler who had absolute power. The ruler was considered the embodiment of Heaven, and was expected to act in accordance with the will of the gods. The Chinese state was also characterized by a strong bureaucracy, which was responsible for administering the law and collecting taxes.

In comparison, the ancient Greek democracy was characterized by a strong emphasis on direct participation in political decision-making. Citizens were expected to participate in the assembly, where they could speak and vote on laws and policies. The Greek state was also characterized by a strong emphasis on education and the development of the individual. The ancient Greeks believed that the good life required the cultivation of the soul, and that this could only be achieved through education.

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egalitarian and participatory in nature, making Athens the model of a direct democracy.

In trying to understand the ethos or culture of Athenian democracy, one should beware of simple characterizations. While its admirers emphasize an ethos of civic virtue and patriotism, few are willing to acknowledge that its elevation of public concerns over private life was not motivated primarily by altruism or self-sacrifice. The spirit of virtue in the ancient democracies is best captured by the word "manliness"—meaning admiration for toughness and strength, love of dominating and exploiting others, and a zest for competing unabashedly for honors in public activities. Virtue was the manly contest to be the greatest in war, oratory, office holding, and public spectacles. As Paul Rahe says in his magisterial history of ancient and modern republics: "To be great and brilliant, to shine ... this was the desire that animated the Greek polis ... Political liberty was the opportunity to do or say something of note ... [which] the poet Simonides [explained by saying] that 'man is distinguished from other animals by his desire for honor ... [a desire that] grows up only in those judged to be real men (andres)."'

Scholars who are less admiring of Greek democracy also point out that this ethos of virtue was combined with a hard-nosed brand of class politics. The economic and social basis of Athenian democracy was the lower middle class: the small farmers, craftsmen, free laborers, shopkeepers, and sailors of the Athenian navy. These were the "people"—the demos—of Athenian democracy. They acquired supreme power in the city of Athens through the reforms of Cleisthenes in 508 B.C. and maintained their dominance over the upper classes of noble birth and new wealth for almost one hundred eighty years (except for two brief periods of oligarchic reaction). Cleisthenes empowered the people not only by making them citizens and giving them equality under the law but also by instituting the practice of "ostracism"—the official act of voting to expel citizens from Athens if they were thought to be too great or powerful. Ostracism was a weapon of class warfare, although it could be considered mild because the usual banishment was temporary (typically ten years) and much milder than other forms of class warfare, such as the guillotining of aristocrats after the French Revolution. Moreover, the Athenians continued to trust select members of old aristocratic families for leadership roles, such as Cleisthenes himself and great generals like Pericles and Alcibiades. The historian Thucydides even notes that under Pericles, the leader of Athenian democracy during its golden age (from about 450–430 B.C.), Athens was really a government of one man. Nevertheless, Pericles governed by maintaining his popularity among the masses and broadening the democratic basis of the regime.

Class politics and the cult of manly virtue, however, were not the only ingredients of Athenian culture; it was also shaped by a sense of ethnic superiority and religious tribalism. The Greeks believed they were superior to the barbarians; and the Athenians believed they were superior to other Greeks, specially protected by the goddess Athena. The Athenian superiority complex was partly due to the legend that they were the only indigenous Greeks—the only Greeks who had always occupied their land (in contrast, it was said, to the Spartans, who came from outside and conquered the indigenous people, the Helots, making them their slaves). The Athenians also believed in their superiority because of the more substantial claim that they led all the Greeks in defeating the Persians, a feat that Herodotus specifically attributes to the pride of the Athenians as freemen who no longer worked for a master but for themselves.

As a result of their sense of superiority, the Athenians felt they were justified in seeking an empire over other Greeks after the Persian wars. In their imperial policy, the Athenians frequently imposed democracy on their colonies, which may sound like an early version of modern American idealism: spreading a universal ideal of democracy and bringing the blessings of freedom to all. But the truth is much less idealistic. The Athenians spread democracy out of self-interest and desire for dominance, creating groups of democratic partisans in the colonies who would be loyal to their Athenian masters. As one classical scholar notes in comparing ancient and modern democracy: "The openness of domination in antiquity [meant] the absence of ideological cover for empire. Pericles boasted to the Athenians that 'no subject of ours can complain of being ruled by unworthy people.' That is as near to an ideological statement as [one] can find about empire." In sum, Athenian democracy was not only a public assembly for the exercise of virtue and self-governance; it was also a blood-and-soil
tribe of warriors, united as a defensive brotherhood against the powerful elites of the city and as an imperialistic army against other cities, races, and gods. The ethos of Athenian democracy, we may therefore infer, was entirely shaped from instinctive drives and popular beliefs—about class solidarity, manliness, and a form of patriotism derived from ethnic superiority and quasi-religious tribalism—rather than from philosophical theories; it was a prerational culture, arising from practical needs and primordial instincts rather than from theoretical reflection.

This fact is particularly striking because the Greek city-states, and Athens especially during the democratic period, were full of philosophers, some living as citizens and some as outsiders. Yet, the great philosophers of antiquity were almost uniformly opposed to democracy and highly critical of Athenian democracy in particular. As one classical scholar notes in astonishment: “The greatest democracy of Greece [produced] no statement of democratic political theory. All the Athenian political philosophers . . . were in various degrees oligarchic [i.e., elitist] in sympathy. . . . Socrates, so far as we can trace his views . . . was at least highly critical of democracy. Plato’s [antidemocratic] views . . . are too well known to need stating. Isocrates in his earlier years wrote panegyrics of Athens, but [later in] his more philosophical works became increasingly embittered against the political regime of his native city. Aristotle is the mostjudicious, and states the pros and cons, but his ideal was a widely based oligarchy [i.e., aristocracy]. With the historians, the same bias is evident. . . . Thucydides is hostile: In one of the few passages where he reveals his personal views he expresses approval of a regime which disenfranchised about two-thirds of the citizens, [including] those who manned the fleet on which the survival of Athens depended. Xenophon was an ardent admirer of the Spartan regime. Aristotle, in the historical part of the Constitution of Athens, followed, rather uncritically, a source with a marked oligarchic bias. Only the fourth century orators [such as Demosthenes] were democrats; and their speeches, being mostly concerned with practical political issues . . . have little to say on the basic principles of democracy, which they take for granted.”

It is hard for us living in the modern world, where many democratic revolutions have been inspired by philosophical theories, to understand the world of classical antiquity where the philosophers and the people diverged so markedly in their political views. The people, and even many of the statesmen of Athenian democracy, simply did not need philosophical theories to justify their rule or to give legitimacy to a regime that was so deeply rooted in instinctive power relations among classes and races—in the common people’s sense of being a band of brothers united against common foes (against the rich above, the slaves below, and the foreigners outside). The closest the people came to possessing a democratic ideology was in using slogans about equality: isonomía, equality under the law, and isegoria, equality of speech. But these slogans originally were applied to aristocrats and only later were extended to accommodate the growing sense of power among the people.

Thus, when Socrates says in Plato’s Republic (503b) that democracy is governed by the “law of equality and freedom” or when Aristotle in his Politics (1280a, 1310a) describes the democratic view of justice as “the equality of free-born citizens,” we may wonder if these accounts are not already a kind of abstract and rationalized version of what typical Athenian citizens felt about their regime. The philosophers use words like equality and freedom and make them sound as if they were universal principles, describing the form of democracy itself. But the Athenians never intended to apply them universally and cannot be accused of hypocrisy (as modern democrats may be accused) when they granted citizenship only to adult males of pure Athenian ancestry who, although not rich, were not born as slaves.

Even after rationalizing the implicit democratic view of justice, the classical philosophers were not impressed with its claims. [The main objection of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and others was that democracy was hostile to real virtue—understood, not merely as manly competition for greatness, but as a rationally ordered soul, in which reason ruled the irrational desires, that was perfected above all by the philosopher and secondarily by liberally educated gentlemen.] The classical philosophers saw in the democratic notion of equality, not the equal opportunity to compete for honors that Pericles praised and Athenians cherished, but the leveling effect of common people on the manners of educated gentlemen and on the rationality of the philosophers. And they saw in the democratic practice of freedom an
indulgence of lower, animal pleasures or an indiscriminate indulgence of both higher and lower pleasures that prevented the full development of reason, the highest faculty of the human soul.

Thus, the classical philosophers judged democracy to be contrary to human dignity as they understood it—contrary, that is, to the elevation of man above the other animals through the perfection of the unique human capacity for rational discourse (logos). From this point of view, democracy is either prerational or subrational; and any attempt to enhance its dignity would require changing it into an aristocracy of wisdom and virtue.

MODERN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

How strange this account of democracy sounds to modern ears! Both the description of ancient democracy and the attitude of the philosophers toward the democratic way of life are alien to us. That is because the kind of democracy familiar to us—modern liberal democracy, embodied above all in the American republic and in British parliamentary government—is radically different from ancient Greek democracy. Hence, the common saying that 'Athens is the birthplace of democracy' is true only in the narrow sense that democracy first arose in ancient Athens. It is false as an account of the origins of modern democracy. [The genus may be the same, but the species are different.]

In other words, the term 'democracy' may be applied to both ancient and modern kinds because the regimes in question are based on the rule of the people. Moreover, certain external similarities exist, such as the common terminology of equality, freedom, and citizenship as well as the classical style of architecture which the American founders employed in our government buildings. But none of the external resemblances changes the fact that ancient and modern democracy are two distinct species of government, differing significantly in matters of scale, institutional arrangements, and ethos or culture.

Unlike the democracies that existed in the ancient Greek city-states or in some of the Italian city-states during the Renaissance, modern liberal democracy arose in the great nation-states of modern Western Europe and America. Comparatively speaking, the democracies of the modern nations have been large in scale, covering vast territories and incorporating hundreds of thousands and eventually millions of citizens. It is often remarked by scholars, and proclaimed in The Federalist Papers (no. 9), that this difference in size or scale is made possible by the device of representation—the delegation of authority by the people to a few persons through elections—which was unknown to the ancients and must be regarded as an invention of modern political science. Such a claim would be boastful exaggeration if it were understood to mean that an institutional device like representation was inconceivable to the dim-witted ancients. After all, the delegation of authority to a few is not hard to imagine, if one is so inclined. One could even argue that representation existed in some fashion in Athens when, contrary to the normal practice of choosing officials by lot, the Athenians elected their generals, on the assumption that decisions about military strategy required special expertise as well as accountability. It can also be found in the office of the Tribune among the Romans, whose republic was dominated by the patricians of the Senate but which allowed popular representation by two tribunes selected to defend the interests of the common people.

One may infer, then, that it was not the inconceivability of a specific institutional device that prevented the ancients from developing representative democracy. Rather, the very notion of representation seemed undesirable to them because only direct or participatory democracy permitted the competition for public honors by all citizens. Size and institutional arrangements are therefore not the decisive factors in determining the character of a democratic regime; something more fundamental is at work. [The large-scale representative democracies of the modern age were made possible by a new ethos or culture whose ingredients must now be identified.]

[The most common view equates the culture of ancient democracy with virtue and that of modern liberal democracy with commerce.] In the unforgettable words of Rousseau, "Ancient politicians talked incessantly about morals and virtue, those of our time talk only of business and money." For Rousseau, the ancients were citizens, while the moderns are bourgeois—the former inspired by patriotism
to subordinate private interest to the public good, the latter concerned primarily with middle-class status and motivated by enlightened self-interest. Rousseau's portrait, of course, is a caricature, which must be qualified by pointing out that America has a strong ethos of civic virtue and participation in local self-government and noble traditions of military service. After making such corrections, however, one must acknowledge that displays of civic and military virtue are the exception and that the dominant moral qualities of modern democracies are in fact bourgeois virtues — the habits of industry, rationality, and peaceful self-absorption that are required for successful careers in business and other middle-class professions. The channeling of most energies into middle-class careerism means that private life takes precedence over public life, which requires the delegation of political responsibilities to representatives.

Despite this emphasis, the ethos of modern liberal democracy contains a passion for justice which, if not comparable to ancient virtue, is also not reducible to bourgeois careerism or a life of private retirement. The inspiring idealism of liberal democracy arises from its foundation on bold principles that claim to be rational and universal in their appeal. Those principles, of course, are the rights of man, otherwise known as natural rights or human rights because they are inherent in human nature. Though embryonic notions of rights may be found in medieval sources (a point I will discuss later), they were not given a systematic rational defense until the philosophers of the Enlightenment did so in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their doctrine was later called liberalism, which combined the liberal principle of securing the rights and liberties of individuals with the democratic principle of government by consent of the people, producing a new political phenomenon, 'liberal democracy.'

Herein lies the major difference between ancient and modern democracy. Whereas the ethos of ancient democracy was shaped by instinctive drives and popular beliefs rather than by teachings of philosophers (most of whom opposed democracy), the ethos of modern democracy has been decisively shaped by the theoretical doctrines of philosophers or intellectuals who became the greatest champions of democracy. As a result, Hegel could say of the most dramatic democratic revolution of his age, "The [French] Revolution received its first impulse from philosophy." This point was also made in critical fashion by Edmund Burke who adamantly opposed the influence of philosophical doctrines in politics, which he considered theoretical abstractions that were inherently revolutionary and dangerous. Burke analyzed the three great democratic revolutions of the modern age — the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, the American Revolution of 1776, and the French Revolution of 1789 — and came to the conclusion that the English and American Revolutions were justified because they were based on custom, tradition, and practical experience rather than the abstract theory of the rights of man which inspired the French Revolution. Yet, even Burke may have underestimated the influence of theoretical doctrines on the English and American Revolutions and on modern liberal democracy in general.

One only has to notice that all three of these revolutions were accompanied by official proclamations or "declarations" — the English Declaration of Rights passed by the British Parliament shortly after the Glorious Revolution, the American Declaration of Independence proclaiming the colonies to be free and independent states, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen passed by the National Assembly shortly after it assumed sovereign power. These declarations showed the need of all three nations to publicly proclaim and rationally justify their revolutions by appealing to the basic principles of liberal democracy — namely, the rights of individuals and government by consent of the governed.

Consider the case of England's Glorious Revolution. While its immediate effect was to replace a Catholic king, James II, with a Protestant king and queen, William and Mary, and to require a Protestant succession, the revolution also had two long-term effects. One was to change the constitutional balance in favor of parliamentary sovereignty. Though Burke insists that Parliament declined to assert its sovereignty at this moment, its written act indicates that it did. The Declaration of Rights passed in 1688 not only settles the monarch's religion "by authority of the present parliament... forever", but Parliament more generally states that "for vindicating... ancient rights and liberties... the pretended power of suspending laws or execution of laws, by regal authority, without consent of parliament, is illegal." Beyond this affirmation of rights and of parliamentary consent, the
revolution marked a shift away from the whole notion of divine right.

The belief that kings are divinely ordained to rule was being replaced by the liberal democratic notion that legitimate authority inheres in the representatives of the people as the most trusted protectors of individual rights.

In the American Declaration, the same principles are presented in more sweeping terms. Liberty is clearly spelled out in terms of the inalienable natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Equality is asserted as a self-evident truth and refers not only to the enumerated rights but also to the principle that "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Equality is linked to government by consent because, as Lincoln later explained, the fundamental meaning of equality is that "no man is good enough to govern another man, without that other's consent." [Equality, therefore, supplies the premise of democratic consent and liberty denotes the exercise of inalienable rights.]

When understood in this fashion, the principles of the English and American Revolutions are similar (though not identical) to those of the French Revolution. Shortly after the Third Estate proclaimed itself the National Assembly and the representative of the French nation, beginning the revolution, it passed its famous Declaration of the Rights of Man which states that all "men are born and remain free and equal in their rights" and the end of every political association is to secure these rights. It then adds that the nation as a whole is the sovereign authority and that "law is the expression of the general will...[in which] every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative." Thus, the official doctrine of the French Revolution asserts notions of freedom and equality that justify the sovereignty of the nation or general will of the people (expressed directly or through representatives) and the rights of man.

This survey of public declarations illustrates the self-consciously ideological nature of modern democracy in comparison to ancient democracy. Even though it suggests that Burke understated the role of abstract principles in the English and American cases (he never mentions Jefferson and Paine in connection with the American Revolution), it does not deny Burke's comparative judgment of the three revolutions: the English was the least ideological, the American was more ideological, and the French was the most ideological democratic revolution. Nor does it deny that other factors besides philosophical principles were at work in the modern democratic revolutions—factors such as class warfare, personal honor and love of military glory, ethnic pride and nationalism, and other prerational motives that shaped ancient democracy. Nor does it rule out the influence of religion, particularly, Protestant Christianity in shaping notions of political authority (although this influence is often misunderstood, as we shall see). After making all of these qualifications, however, the fact remains that modern liberal democracies have been shaped by philosophical doctrines in a way that previous regimes never were; and the decisive doctrine is the philosophy of liberalism.

If we probe the foundations of this philosophy, we reach the deepest level of modern liberal democratic culture: the new notion of human dignity that underlies individual rights and democratic consent. The modern notion of human dignity has many dimensions. The first is the dignity of the individual, meaning the inherent worth of every person as a responsible moral agent, possessing independent judgment and free will. This could be called rational autonomy, for it implies the capacity of individuals to make rational choices for themselves; it could also be called willful autonomy, for it often involves raw assertions of the will in creating a unique personal identity. The second dimension of human dignity is political, the dignity of a people or a nation that freely chooses its destiny. This is sometimes referred to (in the language of the United Nations) as national self-determination or (in the American tradition) as republican self-government.

If we search for the common basis of these two dimensions of human dignity, the personal and the political, it may be found in the underlying metaphysical and cosmological view that is most characteristic of the modern mind—the belief that the universe is ordered by scientific laws that are indifferent to man, requiring human beings to assert their own dignity by showing that they are autonomous beings and masters of their fate. In the modern view of human dignity, God and nature may exist as causes of order in the universe but man's rational constructions and willful creations take precedence as
sources of human dignity or worth. Though this view of human dignity may not be stated explicitly by every liberal philosopher, it is present in some fashion in all versions of philosophical liberalism. And though it may not be recognized in such grand theoretical terms by ordinary citizens of democratic nations, it is present in everyone who finds a sense of dignity in his or her independent judgment, in self-reliant living, in a unique personal identity, and in the pride of participating in national self-determination. [In short, a specific view of human dignity is the underlying assumption of the individual rights and self-government of modern liberal democracy.]

Consider how it animates the exercise of rights. What individuals call their natural or human rights are the claims they make against authority for protections and entitlements. Rights are designed to prevent authorities of all kinds (political, religious, paternal) from interfering in one's life in the name of superior wisdom and virtue or to assert their arbitrary power. 'Don't tread on me!' was the slogan of the Sons of Liberty during the American Revolution that expressed this view of rights. Such rights demand a zone of privacy that is off-limits to the state. They may even go further and demand goods and services from political authorities. Rights, in other words, are claims for protections and immunities or for entitlements that put authority on the defensive. But claims against authority are only half of the argument for rights—the negative or defensive half that aims at protecting people from the violence of tyrants and the persecutions of self-righteous crusaders. In addition, rights presuppose individuals who are capable of enlightened thinking and independent judgment that frees their minds from the intellectual slavery that Thomas Hobbes called the "kingdom of darkness." This project of enlightening the people shows great confidence in ordinary citizens to think for themselves—an affirmation of their freedom and dignity that is more fundamental than the fear and selfishness that Hobbes also attributes to them. The same confidence in the independent judgment of the people was later developed into a theory of rational autonomy by Kant and eventually into a theory of willful autonomy by the romantic theorists of individuality. In all cases, the affirmation of independent thinking confers a status on individuals that raises their rights claims from defensive protections to a near-sacred principle of human dignity.

The same may be said of democracy's principle of government by consent. Its premise is a basic equality among people, which the Declaration of Independence asserts to be self-evident but which later generations of Americans had to explain and to justify. As we noted, Lincoln explained the meaning of equality by saying that no one is good enough to govern others without their consent. The flip-side of this proposition is that, even though human beings are unequal in many respects, everyone has a sufficient moral capacity to govern himself. In Lincoln's eyes, the question of "the capability of a people to govern themselves" had universal significance; indeed, he sometimes spoke as if it had cosmic significance—that the American experiment in republican self-government was "the last best hope of earth."

Why did it matter so much? The most plausible answer, which Lincoln did not develop philosophically, is that republican self-government is the ultimate test of human dignity. If the people could not meet the challenge, even when led by great statesmen like himself, and the nation spun out of control, driven by the destructive passions for expansion, slavery, and secession, then the logical conclusion would be that the people and their elected leaders needed a master of some kind to control them. The capability of a people to govern themselves is a test of human dignity because it is a test of moral responsibility—of the ability of the human race to progress to the point where people can take charge of their lives and act like mature adults rather than like children or slaves who were forever dependent on a self-appointed authority figure to govern them. Lincoln's words resonate with modern democratic citizens precisely because they mean that, if government by the people perishes from this earth, then the dignity of man would be lost; and humanity would be thrown back to a condition where all but a few were kept in child-like dependence and servitude.

This is a remarkable claim that raises some difficult questions. Does it mean that, prior to the democratic revolutions in England, America, and France, people lacked human dignity—that they were not, in a sense, human, or were even subhuman? Does it mean that the success of certain political experiments is required to vindicate the dignity of man? Such thoughts seem to be implied in the statements of two other great American statesmen, Jefferson and Hamilton. At the
beginning of The Federalist Papers, Hamilton equates passage of the newly written Federal Constitution with a historic test: "Whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend ... on accident and force." Hamilton's warning is that a wrong decision at this historic moment would be considered "the general misfortune of mankind."

His reasoning is that submission to the arbitrary dictates of accident and force—fatalism, in other words—is the greatest insult to human dignity, while mastery of one's fate through rational choice is the greatest tribute to human dignity. Hamilton's description of the deliberation about the Constitution raises the event to a world-historic test of human dignity.

A more radical statement of the same idea can be found in Jefferson's shocking defense of the Jacobin Terror of the French Revolution. Although the Terror led to the deaths of thousands in the name of the rights of man, Jefferson coolly argues that it was worth the price, even if most were innocent victims. They died like noncombatants in a great war, Jefferson says, and then adds, in a very revealing choice of words: "Rather than [the French Revolution] should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country and left free, it would be better than it now is." The implication is that the human race begins anew, or rather for the first time, with the French Revolution. Hence, it does not matter if many people were killed, so long as one man and one woman were left, who, now being free for the first time in history, would repopulate the world with free human beings. Like a new Adam and Eve, they would become the true originators of humanity.

The implication is that before the rights of man were proclaimed, people were barely recognizable as human beings because their minds were enslaved to superstition and the mystifications of authority; but after the American and French Revolutions, they attained human dignity for the first time by exercising their independent judgment and taking responsibility for their lives.

Following Jefferson, those who see republican self-government as the decisive test of human dignity oppose any authority that stands above the will of the people, including the chiefs and village elders of most tribal societies, or the kings and priests of feudal societies, or Plato's philosopher-kings. These 'higher authorities' are almost as great an insult to the modern notion of human dignity as the tyrants, dictators, and slave-masters of the world. For even though the traditional authorities may be benevolent, they are essentially paternalistic and threaten the autonomy, independence, or sense of cosmic responsibility required for the modern democratic sense of human dignity.

This sense is so deep and pervasive in modern culture that it can be found in other realms besides ethics and politics. It underlies modern technology and economics and explains why liberal democracy goes hand in hand with industrial and technological society. The goal of technology is to make us "the masters and owners of nature," in Descartes' words, which is driven by more than a desire to relieve suffering and increase material comforts. It is also rooted in an unwillingness to be subject to the forces of nature or to be at the mercy of a hostile and indifferent environment, a sense of pride in controlling human destiny through technology. Likewise, the driving force behind modern economics extends beyond the desire to overcome the pain and suffering of poverty and to enjoy creature comforts. A more fundamental motive is the desire for self-improvement, which means overcoming fatalism and resignation to one's lot in life and becoming instead the master of one's fate by hard work and rational planning.

Modern liberal democracy is thus composed of many strands—individual rights, republican self-government, technological mastery, and economic improvement—that together form a unified culture whose deepest, underlying premise is a notion of human dignity that equates dignity with autonomy and mastery of one's fate. Although this interpretation sounds grandiose, it accurately reflects the tendency of modern liberal democracy to raise politics to a metaphysical, cosmological, or quasi-religious level. It seeks to transcend narrow regime politics, in which one group rules over others, and aims at something that is truly universal—the good of all humanity, the inherent dignity of the human species. Modern liberal democracy, therefore, is more than a political system; it is a philosophy of freedom and a theoretical doctrine of human dignity translated into practical action.
Can Liberalism Vindicate Human Dignity?

With the stakes of politics raised so high, it is only fair to ask if modern liberal democracy and its theoretical defenders have been able to deliver on their promise to uphold and to vindicate human dignity. The question may be answered on two levels. One is the practical level of daily living in which the characteristic way of life found in modern liberal democracies is evaluated, with special attention to the issue of whether it elevates or lowers the dignity of man. Here, I take the side of the theorists of "mass society," the great critics of modern democracy who have argued that the majority of people has been raised in certain material and psychological respects but the overall aim and tone of modern society have been lowered, resulting in a net diminution of human dignity. The second level of evaluation is theoretical; it means evaluating the arguments of the liberal philosophers from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Here again, I take the side of the critics. I believe that the dominant schools of liberalism have followed a flawed strategy of trying to vindicate human dignity by denying the objective existence of a greatest good, thereby allowing each person or nation to determine its own identity. But this strategy is self-defeating, I shall argue, because it slides inevitably from liberalism to moral relativism and undermines all possible grounds for justice and respect. The critique of liberalism will prepare us for a fresh look at the need for a Christian foundation for liberal democracy.

Turning first to the practical level, I would argue that evaluating the characteristic way of life in modern liberal democracies requires us to examine a difficult trade-off. On the one hand, the modern democratic principle of equal respect for every individual has the inspiring effect of opening the world to individual talent by removing the advantages of hereditary privilege and overcoming the barriers of discrimination based on religion, race, and gender. On the other hand (and this is the point that usually goes unnoticed by enthusiasts for modern democracy), the same principle of equal justice has the unavoidable side effect and negative consequence of lowering the ultimate goals and aspirations of society. The simplest description of this change is the replacement of "high culture" with "popular culture," the replacement of a culture that aspires to spiritual, philosophical, artistic, and heroic greatness with one dedicated to mundane pursuits and the tastes of ordinary people. While one might argue that the change in goals is not connected to a political revolution, I believe that the new goals are deeply intertwined with liberal democracy's cherished ideals of equality and freedom and have had a profound effect in lowering the aspirations of the human soul.

In a democratic age, the great monuments of high culture lose their appeal, except as objects in a museum. The noblest achievements of Western civilization—such as classical philosophy and poetry as well as classical art and architecture; the culture of the High Middle Ages, including Gothic architecture and Latin scholasticism; great modern literature from Shakespeare to Tolstoy and great modern music from Bach to Wagner; as well as the whole tradition of liberal arts education—seem too aristocratic or too 'high-brow,' too judgmental and demanding, for most people in a democratic society. Not only do the masses of people feel justified in ignoring them, but the educated elites themselves lose confidence in their enduring value and treat them with irony and contempt, becoming corrupt elites with a mission to subvert or deconstruct high culture. The strongest pressures in a democratic age are always downward from high culture toward popular entertainment, which originally meant replacing aristocratic and religious culture with middle-class and working-class culture but now means sinking to the lowest common denominator of the rebellious avant-garde and raucous youth culture, often of the crudest kind. When, for example, Mozart is replaced by the Beatles as the standard for music, or when Gregorian chant and Bach are replaced by folk music and guitars in Christian liturgy, a dramatic cultural revolution has occurred. The net result is to lower the overall spiritual and moral tone of society and thereby to diminish human dignity by discrediting the highest aspirations of the human soul. This trend has been accurately described as the 'leveling' effect of modern democracy.

In addition to the leveling of culture, modern democratic societies tend to promote a new and rather limited conception of the good life: the one-dimensional materialism of middle-class society, otherwise known as 'bourgeois' civilization or industrial and technological civilization. In evaluating this way of life, we once again face a
difficult trade-off. On the one hand, bourgeois civilization increases the material standard of living and economic opportunities to unprecedented heights for the vast majority of people, overcoming the misery and degradation of poverty that most people have endured for centuries. But the negative consequence is a society dominated by the prosaic activities of material production and consumption, usually in the sterile atmosphere of an urban office building and impersonal suburb, where the chief concerns of people are economic security and status, bourgeois creature comforts, and physical health. These concerns are so obsessive that they begin to redefine reality and create a new metaphysical consciousness which turns the bodily/material world into an absolute horizon. In some cases, the human body is worshiped in rituals that take on the aspect of a religious cult and that seek to deny bodily mortality—as in the jogging and fitness crazes of health fanatics, the elevation of antismoking and vegetarianism to the level of religious crusades, the pantheistic worship of the natural environment as a divine being (called Gaia), and the growing tendency to deny the awesome mystery of death by treating aging and mortality as technical problems to be solved by genetic engineering and pharmaceutical science. With only slight exaggeration, one may say that the work, play, and worship of modern democratic societies tend to deify material existence.

A crucial point to recognize is that such trends are not primarily imposed by the coercive state (though some are aided by it); nor do they triumph by insisting that other more noble activities are forbidden (one is always free to choose). Rather, they triumph because of widespread doubts about the real existence of a transcendent order of Being and Goodness beyond the material world and uncertainties about any higher purpose to life than middle-class careerism and popular entertainment. In most modern democratic societies, these are the only activities that call forth energy and commitment; all others are excluded by skeptical indifference and by demands for immediate sensations that seem harmless because they rarely lead to outright persecution. Instead, the dominant culture is imposed by the social tyranny of public opinion that, in principle, may be rejected but rarely is because the higher alternatives are treated with contempt or are simply forgotten. Thus, as Ernest Fortin has observed, "contrary to its stated aim, modern liberal democracy breeds a specific type of human being—one that is defined by unprecedented openness to all human possibilities. What this leads to most of the time [however] is neither...a noble dedication to some pre-given ideal, nor a deeper religious life, nor a rich and diversified society, but easygoing indifference and mindless conformism." 

The present problem of modern liberal democracy, then, is not the danger of imminent collapse, as Marx predicted, nor even the visible decline that eventually led to the fall of the Roman Empire. Everything may remain stable and prosperous for a long time to come. The fundamental problem is not the obvious one of physical decay or social disorder, but the subtle and elusive one of moral degradation: the proclamation of a lofty commitment to respecting and cherishing the dignity of everyone, especially by eliminating historic barriers to human potential, combined with a culture of skepticism and materialism that drains the soul of all higher longings and encourages slavish conformity to mass society. Stated succinctly, modern liberal democracy proclaims in principle but subverts in practice the dignity of man.

This criticism may sound familiar to many people. It is, after all, a variation on the "theory of mass society" that has been developed by the greatest social critics of the modern democratic age—whom I would identify as Alexis de Tocqueville, Friedrich Nietzsche, and José Ortega y Gasset. In their analysis, the rise of modern democracy (along with modern science, industry, and technology) has unleashed the power and dynamism of the people while turning them into the anonymous "masses"—an undifferentiated collection of rootless, traditionless, and isolated individuals, each claiming to be unique and special but in reality identical to each other in their mundane pursuits, seemingly free but in reality slavishly conformist and ripe for exploitation by new kinds of tyrants, both violent and banal. With the empowering of the masses comes the prospect of a new kind of democratic tyranny.

As Tocqueville warns in Democracy in America, "the species of oppression by which democratic nations are menaced is unlike anything that ever existed in the world." He calls this new species of oppression "soft despotism" and describes it in terms that sound like the modern
burdens of traditional authority (religious, political, and paternal) which have allegedly stultified the ambitions and dreams of people in the name of higher wisdom. The freedom and dignity of individuals and of whole nations are recognized for the first time and allowed to flourish. But the same formula also contains the fatal flaw of liberalism, for the skepticism or doubt which brings emancipation from traditional authority and the recognition of universal human dignity eventually leaves that dignity with no grounding at all in reality and with few resources to resist the pressures of modern mass society. To illustrate this fatal flaw more clearly, I will sketch briefly the high points of liberalism over the past several centuries as it has evolved through four schools of thought: (1) the natural rights school developed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau; (2) the idealist school developed by Immanuel Kant and the German Idealists; (3) the utilitarian-pragmatist school led by John Stuart Mill and John Dewey; and (4) the contemporary nonfoundationalist school associated with Richard Rorty, John Rawls, Bruce Ackerman, and Ronald Dworkin. The overall pattern that we find in the evolution of liberalism is growing doubt about the power of reason to know the greatest good combined with heightened moral demands to respect the equal dignity of every human being in a world of ever-increasing democratic conformity.

**The Liberal Philosophers**

If we go back to the beginning of liberalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we can see clearly that its first and most powerful move is skeptical and subversive. There we find the natural rights school of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau who expressed their skepticism in the striking image of the state of nature—a description of human beings without political authority living in a chaotic and isolated condition. The state of nature is meant to show that political authority is not natural or ordained by God because no clear signs have been given from above that establish indisputable titles to rule. The traditional claims to rule—wisdom, virtue, holiness, or nobility—seem so intangible and so easily exploited by ambitious leaders...
seeking power over others that the natural condition of mankind is anarchy or warfare. The implication is that God and nature are so uncaring and so stingy that men must construct political authority on their own through an artificial social contract and create wealth by conquering and transforming nature through their own labor. This is the original reasoning behind natural rights: Providence does not give sufficient guidance or adequate support for human life, so men must provide for themselves and are naturally free and equal. The premise “men are born free” underlies natural rights because it means that we are born without obligations to higher authority and have the “right” to follow our own inclinations, primarily for self-preservation and property. In this way, skepticism about Providence leads to natural rights.

The problem with this school of liberalism is that it uncovers the rights of man as an autonomous being, but it also takes away the grounds of human dignity. The difficulty is most obvious in Hobbes, who views man as naturally free and as a machine without soul or freedom of the will, thereby abolishing the distinctiveness of human beings in comparison to other animals. While Locke and Rousseau are more reluctant to use mechanistic psychology to explain human behavior, they are not able to provide an alternative grounding for freedom and human dignity. Locke admits as much when he says there is no essential trait, such as the possession of a rational soul, that clearly distinguishes human beings from the other animals and directs them to rational perfection as a natural end. The problem is even more acute for Rousseau. He is forced into the inconsistent position of waxing poetically about the dignity of man as a moral being, while seeking the ultimate human experiences in irrational sentiments (such as the sentiment of existence) that abolish our humanity and reduce us to the level of contented animals. The natural rights school is obviously at cross-purposes with itself, exalting and debase man from one moment to the next.

In response to this dilemma about human dignity, a more idealistic school of liberalism arose in the eighteenth century, founded by Immanuel Kant. While Kant was certainly a philosophic genius, we should not be blinded by his stature from seeing that he was following the same flawed strategy as his predecessors. He tried to combine philosophical skepticism (which he learned from Hume) with a moral theory of human dignity (which he learned from Rousseau). Kant’s hope was that by taking skepticism to a deeper level than his predecessors, freedom and human dignity could be taken outside of empirical and biological processes and put on a secure foundation as pure rational ideas. With this move, Kant restored the crucial distinction between human beings and the rest of nature: Human beings are higher than animals and dumb matter because they have rational wills which give them freedom or autonomy outside of nature. In Kant’s eyes, this gives humans infinite worth or dignity; it makes them “persons,” rather than “things,” who have rights that must be recognized and respected by others.

Kant’s contribution lies in making human dignity the theme of philosophy and the centerpiece of liberalism. With so much at stake, Kant realizes that a rational justification for human dignity must be provided and acknowledges that his whole case comes down to one crucial question: Is freedom of the will, which gives us our dignity as responsible moral agents, an illusion or a reality? The problem for Kant is that his commitment to skeptical reason makes positive proofs for the existence of freedom impossible; only “negative” proofs are possible. Kant actually made three attempts at the negative proof for freedom; and the gist of all of them was the same: The existence of freedom can never be disproven because reason cannot grasp the ultimate nature of reality. Hence, free will and moral responsibility are not contrary to reason and may be assumed in moral action. The only positive support for freedom that Kant could offer was a glimpse into a mysterious “noumenal” world beyond the physical world in which freedom is assumed to operate as the intangible cause of unselfish acts that we often see in human affairs.

Despite Kant’s best efforts, his negative proofs for freedom and dignity are deeply unsatisfying. They are more like wishful thinking than rational proofs because all they show is that we may act “as if” we were free, without knowing if it were really the case. Kant is unable to say for sure because his skepticism requires him to suspend judgment about the real existence of intangible things, such as the human soul or the mysterious noumenal world of intangible causes. Nor can Kant say if reason, which makes us free, is anything more than a cosmic
accident: Does nature care for the human mind, or is nature basically indifferent to man? Kant's skepticism prevents him from deciding one way or the other, so human dignity is left as an ardent but ungrounded wish of all moral beings. Once again, liberalism comes up short.

Because of dissatisfaction with the natural rights and Kantian schools of liberalism, a third school arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—the school of utilitarianism and pragmatism led by John Stuart Mill and John Dewey. Like every attempt to save liberalism from within, this version reacts to earlier failures by driving the wedge of skepticism even deeper. Utilitarians and pragmatists are more skeptical than their predecessors in rejecting not only permanent laws of nature (such as natural rights) but also static structures of the mind (such as Kant's moral law and mental categories). Utilitarianism and pragmatism are deeply suspicious of any kind of unchanging metaphysics. Instead of appealing to permanent laws or unchanging entities, they attempt to justify freedom and dignity with historicism—the belief in open-ended historical change, sometimes called progress or merely the endless flux of existence.

From the notion of open-ended change, Mill and Dewey developed the alluring idea of "individuality"—the belief that everyone possesses a unique personal identity that must be allowed to grow freely in a society of diverse personalities. Yet, like most liberal philosophers, they offer arguments for individuality that are primarily negative in character. Mill's main thrust is to attack the stultifying effects of middle-class conformity which he found in the materialism and dilution of Christianity of Victorian England. Mill defends the maximum diversity of opinions and lifestyles within a stable order, including willful "nonconformity" and eccentricity, in order to reinvigorate modern societies. While Dewey is more accepting than Mill of modern industrial society, Dewey shares Mill's antipathy to any fixed structures that would inhibit individual self-expression. Dewey's alternative is the experimental method, which promotes the continuous growth of personality as an end-in-itself or change without reference to a predetermined end. It would be hard to underestimate the attraction of this idea of open-ended change for many modern people.

If we examine Mill's and Dewey's justifications for the growth of individual personality, however, we encounter the characteristic weakness of philosophic liberalism. An appealing notion of individual dignity coexists with the denial of any ultimate purpose to life, which leaves little more than the process of change itself as the reason for living. This is apparent in Mill's principle of utility which he insists is not merely a calculation of pleasures but a conception of man as "progressive being"—a being that continuously strives for higher levels of culture and morality as measured on an open-ended scale of general happiness. Dewey appeals to a pragmatic notion of "experience," which he tries to explain in metaphysical terms that depend on the primacy of the human will: Through conscious interaction with the dynamic flux of existence, the pragmatic will connects the thinking subject with the reality of being.

The problem with these arguments is that they are too subjective to provide adequate grounds for human dignity. Mill admits as much when he says that the ultimate sanction for the principle of utility is "a subjective feeling in our minds." And Dewey puts the practical assertions of the will before thinking and being. Thus, there is no real reason why individuals with strong subjective feelings or with strong wills should not harm others by exploiting and dominating them instead of acting justly toward them or treating them with respect. The fact that the theories of utility and pragmatism have generally supported liberal democracy rather than tyranny or anarchy is purely accidental—a consequence of limitations imposed by the much-maligned social conventions of the Victorian age and of moral virtues still alive in the cultural heritage of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (in Mill's case by the influence of a residual Aristotelianism and in Dewey's by a residual Christianity). It thus appears that Mill and Dewey, like earlier liberal philosophers, have fatal flaws because they are committed to an approach that equates reason with skepticism and defines dignity as open-ended autonomy, leaving human dignity standing on little more than wishful thinking and unfounded faith in progress.

Despite the problems, there is no rush to disavow the self-defeating strategy of liberalism. The most recent school—the nonfoundationalist or postmodern school led by Rorty, Dworkin, Ackerman, and Rawls—is content to rework the strategies of the great liberal philosophers of the past without recognizing the inherent flaw. In fact, the latest
philosophers are even more skeptical than their predecessors. They claim that the whole search for foundations is futile and harmful, a relic of metaphysical and theological prejudices preserved in earlier schools of liberalism that foster social division and uphold arbitrary patterns of domination. Without presenting a detailed critique here of postmodern liberalism, I simply would like to point out the staggering contradiction that lies at the heart of its teaching: On the one hand, it is deeply skeptical about knowing the greatest good or any foundation for justice; on the other hand, it insists on an absolute moral imperative to treat all people with equal concern and respect. This amounts to saying that there is no basis whatsoever for morality but, of course, we must still be decent to other people and treat them with respect!

My favorite example of this stunning contradiction is Richard Rorty's comments about defending human dignity in his influential article, "Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism." There, Rorty frankly refers to postmodern liberals like himself as "freeloading atheists"—people who do not believe in God or any metaphysical grounds for morality, yet who absolutely affirm the duty of treating people with dignity and respect. He says, it is "part of our tradition . . . that [a] stranger from whom all dignity has been stripped [should] be taken in and re-clothed with dignity. This Jewish and Christian element in our tradition is gratefully invoked by freeloading atheists like myself" who think that metaphysical debates are futile. He even says that these debates have as little relevance to our treatment of each other as "the question of the existence of God." What Rorty is admitting by calling himself a "freeloading atheist" is that he cherishes the Judeo-Christian inheritance of defending human dignity, but he thinks that it can be disconnected from belief in God. In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, he adheres to Christian morality without believing in the Christian God—a strange mixture of nihilism and moralism that Nietzsche believed followed from the death of God in modern times.

From this brief account of the evolution of liberalism or, more precisely, of the descent of liberalism into nihilism, we are led to a momentous conclusion: Liberalism lacks the intellectual courage and moral "fire power" to vindicate the belief in human dignity that it assumes in all its activities and institutions. Hence, liberalism cannot stand without help from outside the liberal tradition. Above all, it cannot stand without faith in God—though I hasten to add that the need for God does not mean that any old god will do! The moral assumptions underlying modern liberal democracy cry out for religious and metaphysical assistance, but not every idea of the supreme being or of ultimate reality are suitable to its conception of human dignity.

This difficulty is abundantly clear from the recent writings of Václav Havel, the distinguished president of the new Czech republic. After fighting courageously for human rights and human dignity against communist tyranny, Havel has spent a considerable amount of time agonizing over the question of how to justify his cherished principles. He refers to his quest in religious or poetic language as Cosmic Anchoring—the search for a cosmic support for justice that has led him to invoke such ideas as the "Gaia hypothesis" (belief in the mother earth goddess of environmentalists) or Heidegger's Being (belief in the sheer existence of things by fateful dispensation). Havel is aware that he is trying to replace Christian faith, which he admires but is unable to embrace for reasons he never makes clear, with a post-Christian god or new spirituality that provides grounds for ultimate meaning. His hope is that the new gods will justify the moral code he so highly esteems. Yet, there is something whimsical and almost desperate about his invocation of new gods, as if any kind of fuzzy New Age religion is believable or provides support for man's inherent rights and dignity. At best, we find in Havel a search for principles that resemble natural law—a common minimum morality that, in his words, must come from somewhere: "from heaven, or from nature, or from our hearts: a belief that our deeds will live after us; respect for our neighbors, for our families, [and] for certain natural authorities; respect for human dignity and for nature . . . and benevolence towards guests who come with good intentions." What Havel yearns for in his quest for Cosmic Anchoring (but avoids without adequate explanation) is the biblical God who gives man a special place and dignity in this vast cosmos that might otherwise seem empty and inhospitable to human concerns. Havel especially needs to reconsider Christianity, which raises the claim of human dignity to the highest level by viewing man as a creature made in the image of God and redeemed by the Incarnation of God in the
person of Jesus Christ. Following this suggestion, we may ask if it is possible for Christianity to come to the aid of liberal democracy and vindicate its assumptions about human dignity: Can liberalism be saved by grounding or regrounding its principles in the proposition that man is made in the image and likeness of God?

**Christian Apologetics**

Here we face two momentous issues. One is the truth of Christianity, which is the domain of theology traditionally called ‘apologetics’—rational arguments for the truth of the Christian faith. The second issue is the politics of Christianity, which is the domain of ‘political theology’—the implications of the Christian faith for political and social order. I will turn first to Christian apologetics with the awareness that it is a challenge of staggering proportions, though it is one that cannot be avoided in the present context. After all, skepticism may be the only honest position to hold, even if it is a disaster for modern democracy and leaves one in varying degrees of doubt about how to live. Another reason why we need to turn our attention to Christian apologetics is that philosophical alternatives to the self-defeating skepticism of modern liberalism do exist, namely, classical Greek philosophy as developed by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Classical Greek philosophy has an advantage over modern liberalism by holding a more robust view of the human good than open-ended autonomy, and classical philosophy recognizes the need for groundings in a teleological view of nature.

But I would like to challenge the skeptical view of liberalism as well as the naturalism of classical Greek philosophy on the grounds that the supernatural claims of Christianity actually provide the most plausible account of the universe and man, even though they cannot be demonstrated with absolute certainty and therefore require faith in addition to reason. As I see it, the claims of the Christian religion can be reduced to three doctrines: the Creation, the Fall, and the Redemption through Christ. Though I will offer no more than a brief apologetic for each of these doctrines, I believe the rational arguments that I will make are sufficient to shake the complacent skepticism of modern intellectuals and to show the Christian doctrines to be more plausible than alternative accounts of the universe and man.

First, let us consider Creation. According to Christian doctrine, the universe is created from nothing by an omnipotent God whose will is mysterious but benevolent. If we think broadly about the origin and existence of the universe, it is possible to argue that this doctrine provides the most likely account. It is certainly more plausible than the view of Aristotle, who apparently thought that the world is uncreated or eternal in its present form (implying that the universe has always been here, pretty much as we see it today). This is implausible because modern ‘Big Bang’ cosmology has offered some compelling arguments about the expanding universe that indicate it has evolved to its present state from a unique beginning point. Yet, modern cosmologists are mistaken if they think that the unique beginning point is merely an accident, just as Eastern religions and existential philosophy are misguided in suggesting that the universe is simply ‘given’ and that awe at the sheer existence of things is our deepest response to the world. The claim that the universe is accidental or simply ‘given’ is unlikely, even though our universe does not have to exist at all, nor does it have to exist in the way that it does. The existence and present form of the universe are radically contingent, though it does not make sense to say it is accidental.

That is because the universe does not simply exist as a brute fact. It exists in a way that is highly rational and remarkably stable, even though the infinite vastness and littleness of its extremes will always be mysterious, as Pascal said. These characteristics of the natural universe—its rational order and remarkable stability combined with its radical contingency and deep mystery at the extremes—are more amazing than the sheer existence of the universe. The obvious inference is that something necessary must lie behind the contingent order and stability of the universe in order to keep them on track. Only a God who is a Necessary Being has the power to create a radically contingent universe from nothing and to make it operate by stable rational laws for a definite amount of time without collapsing or reversing itself. This is the miracle of Christian Creation. Though a miracle, it is more plausible than an accidental Big Bang which provides no explanation for the stability and intelligibility of the laws of
nature. And it is more plausible than the universe of Eastern religion whose 'givenness' without rhyme or reason turns the stable and rational laws of nature into passing illusions to be succeeded by other illusions, like the images of a kaleidoscope. Contingent Being upheld by Necessary Being is a more plausible way to think about our rational and stable but mysterious universe than views which reduce it to accidental illusion. This implies a God who is infinite and unchanging, yet who changed without compromising Himself in creating the finite world—the Christian God.

The second essential Christian doctrine is the Fall, the corruption of the world by the rebellious will of man. The Fall provides the most plausible account of evil, suffering, and death. It is far more plausible than modern liberalism, which holds the Rousseauian idea that man is good by nature but society makes him bad through its unjust and oppressive institutions. The Rousseauian view is refuted by the fact that all social experiments in utopia inevitably fail, due to something deeply perverse in human nature. The view of Plato, that evil lies in ignorance (in irrationality due to our finite bodies), is better than Rousseau’s explanation; but it is still not satisfying. Plato always looks foolish when he treats evil as irrationality, as an apparent good that can be cured by the complete rationality of philosophy. The tyrants Plato invents to embody evil and to challenge Socrates always look too benign, like misguided hedonists or ‘erotic’ men who somehow missed their calling. Plato is not naive about tyrants or the power of evil; but he is forced by the logic of his position to sound naive—to claim that evil is no more perverse than the apparent good of an irrational person who has been misled by passion or temporary insanity.

A better explanation is given by Paul, who states the Christian view of evil in Rom. 7:15–20: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do the good that I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I agree that the law is good... [yet] the evil I do not want is what I do.” The meaning of Paul’s deceptively simple statement is that evil is not an apparent good as Plato suggests. Paul is not deluded or confused about right and wrong; he knows the true good is obedience to God’s law, and he is even aware that his “innermost self” delights in goodness. But he does the evil deed anyway. The implication is that evil is not simply ignorance or irrationality but pure perversity: willful rebellion for no other reason than to be equal to God or to be self-sufficient without God. This is best captured in the Christian doctrine of the Fall and its corollary, original sin—the idea that man was originally good but lost that goodness in a primary act of rebellion that has been transmitted by the first human beings to everyone afterwards. As a result of original sin, all people have rebellious wills that tempt them to do evil and that cause their sinful actions.

By combining the notion of (original goodness with inherited rebelliousness) Christian anthropology offers the best account of man—an account of our dual nature, both divine and sinful, containing elements of greatness and elements of wretchedness that cannot be overcome merely by changing unjust social institutions or by philosophizing about the good. As many proponents of Christian anthropology have observed, the continuing power of evil and suffering in the world provides empirical support for the doctrine of the Fall and its theological elaboration as original sin which no philosophical doctrine is able to match.

The third basic Christian doctrine is the Redemption through Christ. How can this doctrine be made rationally plausible? The central point of Christian redemption is that evil and suffering are not inevitable because God in His divine mercy became man in order to redeem the fallen world. Admittedly, the doctrine of Redemption through the Incarnation of God in Christ is impossible to prove rationally or even to comprehend rationally. How could the infinite and unchanging God enter the finite world and still remain divine? Why would God do so? To these questions, I would reply, in the first place, that Creation from nothing also implies that the infinite God entered the finite world without compromising Himself for reasons we cannot comprehend. Hence, if the Creation is possible, then so is the Incarnation. At both unique moments, the eternal and infinite God entered time and space to display His gracious goodness.

Though a mystery, the doctrine of Redemption through Christ is the only way to make sense of the good deeds that human beings do in a world that often appears tragic or indifferent. Why bother to be good if the world is not a moral order? The Redemption shows that the world is a moral order, despite the existence of natural disasters, disease, poverty, war, and tyrannies that often ruin the most innocent
of victims. The Redemption reafirms the essential goodness of Creation and reminds us that suffering and evil are not simply 'given' as facts of life. The Creation of the universe is radically contingent, but it is also "good," even "very good" as the Bible says, which implies that the world is not inherently tragic, perverse, or indifferent. Yet, the evil and suffering that we witness in the world cannot be overcome by the efforts of mortal men. This is the illusion of modern humanism and progress—the illusion that human beings can redeem themselves through politics, technology, therapy, or social engineering. This is a false hope for redemption because sin is too deep to be overcome by self-help methods; and death cannot be conquered by anything but an omnipotent God. Instead, we need God's grace to restore original goodness, requiring the miracle of the Incarnation and divine atonement for sin.

Without redemption by divine atonement, we have no guarantee that goodness of the world can be affirmed against the enormous power of evil and suffering, no guarantee of moral order, no guarantee that good deeds are not folly or waste. The response of the Greek philosophers and Eastern sages to this challenge is detachment from the world through contemplation or meditation. But are not philosophy and meditation merely ways of escaping from the world and avoiding the problem of moral order? Every act of goodness is an implicit denial of the tragic and indifferent character of the universe; but such acts have no ultimate justification except faith in divine redemption that will set aright the wrongs of the world and bring about the cessation of evil. To embrace this crucial doctrine of the Christian religion is an act of faith; yet it makes more rational sense than pretending that man can redeem the world through human efforts alone or that one can deny the need for moral order.

To summarize my brief attempt at apologetics: I think that the most plausible way to defend the truth of Christianity is to begin with observations that few could deny—the existence of an intelligible and stable but contingent universe, the existence of evil and suffering, and the existence of good deeds—and then infer that the Christian doctrines of Creation, Fall, and Redemption provide the best possible explanations for the phenomena. The implication is that reason itself leads to Christian faith when we are able to see the supernatural mysteries behind the observable realities—when we see that behind the creation is the Creator, behind evil is the Fall, behind every act of goodness is the Redemption. None of this implies, of course, that other philosophies and religions lack elements of beauty and truth. It merely implies that other philosophies and religions, insofar as they approximate these doctrines, contain partial truths and need to be brought to fulfillment and completion.

POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Having ventured briefly into apologetics and hopefully challenged the complacency of modern skeptics and classical naturalists, we are now ready for 'political theology' and the second half of the dilemma posed at the beginning: Liberalism needs Christianity, and Christianity is arguably the best account of the universe and man; but does the Christian religion necessarily support democracy and human rights? A growing number of serious scholars think that it does—that Christianity is especially well suited to provide a religious foundation for liberal democracy.

In the first place, they suggest, Christianity makes claims about the dignity of man that resemble the claims of liberalism in being both universal and personal. But instead of grounding those claims on skeptical reason, Christianity grounds them on the biblical claim that there is a God who created the universe and made every human being in His image and likeness and sent a Redeemer to save them by God's grace. Such claims about the moral order of the universe and the divine spark in everyone seem to be ideally suited for the defense of human dignity that liberalism needs but palpably lacks.

Second, Christianity has a deep reservoir of doctrinal resources that may be adapted to politics—including notions of Christian freedom and equality, prophetic traditions of denouncing oppression and injustice, as well as theological conceptions of conscience and covenant in the Protestant tradition and of natural law in the Catholic tradition. From these resources, one ought to be able to derive a principled argument for liberal democracy that is superior to secular theories of individual rights and democratic consent.
Third, Christianity has been associated historically with the origins and progress of liberal democracy in the modern world, from the Pilgrim settlement of early America to the antislavery and civil rights movements to the heroic struggles for religious freedom against tyrannical governments around the globe.

Fourth, Christianity in the twentieth century evolved internally toward more liberal democratic views, as occurred, for example, in the writings of Jacques Maritain, John Courtney Murray, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as well as in Christian movements from neoconservatism to liberation theology. Similar developments can be seen in the documents of the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church and in statements by Protestant and even Eastern Orthodox churches. All of these signs point to the essentially harmonious relations between modern liberal democracy and Christianity.

Accordingly, one might hope for a refounding of liberal democracy on Christian principles that rescues liberalism from its descent into nihilism and breathes into it moral and spiritual vitality. Surely, this is a noble endeavor. But I do not think that it is easy to accomplish as it sounds. There is a major problem, frequently cited by the enemies of religion but insufficiently acknowledged by its friends: Christianity is not necessarily connected in principle to any form of government and may even be incompatible in crucial respects with liberal democracy, despite the hopeful signs mentioned above. In the chapters that follow, I shall explore this issue in depth while trying to avoid the wishful thinking of liberalism and of much of contemporary Christian theology.

One of the disturbing implications of the preceding analysis is that modern liberals as well as many modern Christians are in a state of denial about the predicament of liberal democracy. On the one side, liberals tend to deny that their cherished principles of human rights and human dignity need a grounding in an objective moral order. They seem to think that skepticism about the good life is sufficient to justify the treatment of others with equal concern and respect. Some, like Richard Rorty, even boast that they are “freeloading atheists” whose respect for the dignity of individuals rests on nothing more than the residual moral sentiments of a religious and philosophical tradition that they have repudiated. But this leaves the entire liberal project unsupported, like a table without legs suspended in midair.

On the other side, religious believers often proclaim that the emptiness of liberalism can be overcome by religious revival—by a return to God—while ignoring the incompatibilities that might exist between their faith and their politics. Simply because the present political order needs a reinvigoration of spiritual beliefs, it does not automatically follow that Christianity, or any other religion, supports liberal democratic principles or is tied to a specific political regime. Can we really say with confidence, as a recent scholar claims, that an inner affinity exists between Christian faith and liberal democracy, that “just as Christianity is in some fundamental sense the truth of the liberal conception, so the liberal order can be considered the political