

An “Ever Better” Judaism? Progressivism and Orthodox Judaism

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The political climate in America is more hostile today than at any other time in recent memory. Many believe the country is headed for a civil war between liberals and conservatives, whose issues are not confined exclusively to the domain of politics. These issues are now penetrating Jewish thought, ritual, and practice.

Essentially, the debate is an ideological clash between two conflicting visions. The liberals, in the vein of their godfather and patron saint, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, believe in the ideology of progressivism, originally known as Meliorism during the Enlightenment (Kessler, 2018). Roughly translated, the Latin adjective *Meliora* means “ever better.”

There are two main tenets to Meliorism. The first is a belief in the natural goodness of Man, corrupted by society. Human beings are born naturally benevolent, and the evil and problems in the world are introduced to us externally from society. By tinkering with society—adjusting our norms and customs—we can eradicate these problems, balance the world, and make everyone healthy and happy.

The second main tenet is a belief in the progress of human nature. The present age is superior to the past, which means that the norms of the past are insufficient for contemporary Man. We must therefore abolish the norms of the past and create new ones to suit today’s modern Man.

The opposition to Meliorism is called, “the tragic nature of the human condition” (Kessler, 2018; Sowell, 1987). The tragic nature’s counterargument to the first tenet is that human beings are born neither purely good nor evil, but with an ethical dualism raging inside each person. Our evil inclinations are sewn into the very fabric of the human condition. Evil cannot be eradicated from the world, no matter how much tinkering we attempt to apply.

The second rejoinder is that human nature is constant, fixed, and unchanging. We, in the present, are no different than our earliest ances-

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tors. To those believing in the tragic nature, they believe that, “by definition, human nature is constant. Because of that constancy, men of vision were able to describe the norms, the rules for mankind” (Kirk, 1989, p. 39). These norms are, “an enduring standard... law of nature, which we ignore at our peril” (Kirk, 1989, p. 17). Unlike Meliorism, which believes progress consists in the destruction of old norms and the creation of new ones, the tragic nature believes that, “real progress consists in the movement of mankind towards the understanding of norms, and towards conformity to norms” (Kirk, 1989, p. 20). True progress is not found in the creation of new norms, nor in the destruction of the old ones, but rather in adherence to the old norms.

Liberal progressive values are permeating many spheres of social life and contemporary Orthodox Judaism is not immune from their reach. In this essay, liberal progressive values, their origins, and their counterarguments are explored to determine if they are congruent with traditional Orthodox Judaism. It is important to note that the validity of these issues in contemporary American society are not explored. This conversation is confined exclusively within the domain of traditional Orthodox Judaism, and not society at large. The main source for interpreting liberal progressive values will be Jean-Jacques Rousseau; the counterargument will emanate largely from the work and thought of Edmund Burke, the original conservative.

The first place to start in this assessment is with Rousseau. Progressivism, as an ideology, emanates largely from his philosophical work. The seminal construct in Rousseau’s work and thought is quoted below:

The fundamental principle of all morality, upon which I have reasoned in all my writings and which I developed with all the clarity of which I am capable is that man is a being who is naturally good, loving justice and order; that there is no original perversity in the human heart, and the first movements of nature are always good. (Rousseau, 1762)

By tinkering with society—adjusting our norms, laws, customs, and language—we can eradicate evil. As Arthur Melzer, a scholar of Rousseau, explained: “Evil derives from society rather than from their sinful natures and that it may be cured or ameliorated through human... action” (Melzer, 1990, p. 19). Because evil comes from without and not from within, “then perhaps it could be overcome by reordering society. In principle, Rousseau opens up radical new hopes for politics, utopian, messianic... hopes that it can transform the human condition, bring secular salvation, make all men healthy and happy” (Melzer, 1990, p. 23).

This is the surface explanation of the above referenced quotation. The way Rousseau arrived at this conclusion is subtly alluded to at the end: "There is no original perversity in the human heart." The word "original" is an allusion to the concept of Original-Sin, a doctrine articulated by St. Augustine regarding one of the first biblical stories from the Torah, the story of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Due to their first sin, we are all vicarious sinners, and we are all subsequently imperfect and flawed beings due to their actions. As Jews, we do not believe in Original-Sin on a semantic level, but we certainly believe in the validity and truth of the Torah. Orthodox Jews read this story from the Torah literally and believe with reverence that the event occurred as written.

Rousseau invalidated the evil inclination within Man and then transferred it to society. This is at odds with what Ben Zoma asked in Pirkei Avot: "Who is strong? He who conquers his evil inclination" (4:1). As Jews, we believe in an ethical dualism with the figurative angel on one shoulder, known as the "*Yetzer-Tov*," and the figurative devil on the other, known as the "*Yetzer-Hara*." It is through our choices and temperance to our evil inclination that our behavior is adjudicated, not our relationship to society.

In secular terms, Edmund Burke believed Rousseau's notion of the natural goodness of Man was wildly inaccurate. He understood Man's ethical dualism thusly:

We must soften into a credulity below the milkiness of infancy to think all men virtuous. We must be tainted with a malignity truly diabolical, to believe all the world to be equally wicked and corrupt. Men are in public life as in private, some good, some evil. The elevation of the one, the depression of the other, are the first objects of all true policy. (Burke, 1770)

Human beings can be good, yes, but they can also be evil. Enabling Man's good nature and suppressing his evil inclination is of the utmost importance.

For Rousseau, society was indeed the source of Man's corruption. Again, as he negated Original-Sin, he did not believe in the Torah's creation myth. He had his own origin-story for Mankind. He believed in something he referred to as, "the state of nature."

The state of nature was a fictitious utopia where human beings were naturally equals and were naturally benevolent, and lived free from labor and the judgments of others. Rousseau wrote of the loss of the state of nature in *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1753): "The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying This is

mine, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society” (1753, p. 23). Once this person acquired private property for himself, society began, and then our ensuing corruption. Rousseau interpreted the causal chain of events in the following way: “The moment one man began to stand in need of the help of another; from the moment it appeared advantageous to any one man to have enough provisions for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became indispensable” (1753, p. 27).

Rousseau discussed a nuanced position in the quote above to which many liberals today adhere: the notion that prior to the corrupting influence of society, human beings were equal. Rousseau truly believed that, “there is in fact in this state of nature an actual and indestructible equality” (Rousseau, 1762).

Traditional Orthodox Judaism does not support the notion of equity. The pith of the Decalogue are authoritative commandments from God to the Jews. Not only are we to obey the word of God, but in the fifth commandment, we must honor our parents. The importance of our surrender to the authority of our parents is an important reminder of the just and natural hierarchies of the world; they necessitate our acceptance. Ben Zoma asked a question that supports this notion: “Who is rich? He who is happy with his portion” (4:1). The reason for this answer is that there will always be someone with more than you. More money, a bigger house, better luck, a more attractive spouse, or a nicer car. It is our job to temper our evil inclination, accept that life is not fair, and accept that we, as human beings, are not equals.

Burke also understood what Ben Zoma did. There are natural hierarchies and just-inequities in the world. Attempting to rectify these just-inequities means that, “those who attempt to level, never equalise... The levellers therefore only change and pervert the natural order of things” (1790, para. 79). These natural inequalities are sewn into the fabric of the human condition and can never be eradicated. Attempting to fix them will only make things worse than had we accepted them in the first place.

The liberal progressives repudiate this notion, and instead believe in the natural equity of Man, corrupted by society. This natural equity of Man corrupted by society is the basis for a major component of progressive ideology (Haidt, 2013). The Meliorist progressivist believes that by fixing society, we can balance the world, and restore the natural equality and natural goodness of Man. This Meliorist premise is implicit in the contemporary iteration of society fixing, an ideological term known as, “social justice.”

Social justice is predicated on rectifying societal inequities. According to social justice scholarship, society is an arbitrary social construct—in other words, a complete nonsensical fabrication—that is inequitably structured to favor White, male, able-bodied, cisgendered, heterosexuals. The theory assumes that these people are successful in life because society is structured to favor them, and they use the inequitable structure of society to socially advance by stepping on the heads and shoulders of “people of color” or “others.” These others are unsuccessful because White men are stepping on their heads and shoulders to get ahead. Should we fix the inequitable structure of society, we will restore the natural equity of the world. In theory, those at the bottom will rise to the top, and those at the top will sink to a lower social status.

To the social justice scholar, the “big 3” of social justice—racism, privilege, and cultural appropriation—are based on a simple formula: racism, privilege, or cultural appropriation equals prejudice plus power structure. Therefore, only those benefiting from societal power structure—i.e., White men (and, to a lesser extent, those with any of the aforementioned demographic characteristics)—are capable of having privilege, being racist, or appropriating culture (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018).

The goal of social justice is to rectify the discrepancies caused by society to restore the natural equity of Man. Peggy McIntosh, author of, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1989), referred to these discrepancies as either unearned entitlements, unearned privileges, or unearned power. Because these societal entitlements are unearned, they must be taken away from those privileged and in positions of power.

For example, only White people are capable of appropriating culture, so a White person with dreadlocks—a hairstyle not typically associated with Caucasian genetics—is appropriating culture, while a Black woman with blonde highlights—another hairstyle not typically associated with Black genetics—is not. In accordance with social justice ideology, the White person is appropriating culture, and the Black person is not. Those who wish to implement social justice practices in this instance are then endowed with the ability to take the dreadlocks away from the White person without gaining anything in return.

This is the hallmark of the emotion of envy. When it is not about someone rising to the level of another person, but about the lower person yanking the higher person down; when it is not about someone having what another person has, but about the other person not having it altogether; and when it is not about someone winning, but about another losing, we have envy on our hands (Shoek, 1966; de la Mora, 1987).

Social justice, as an ideology, desires equity. The implicit problem with equity as a moral foundation and goal, something liberals base much of their ideological presumptions on (Nisbet, 1966; Haidt, 2013), is that equity causes envy. As Alexis de Tocqueville, author of the brilliant tome, *Democracy in America*, astutely observed:

One must not conceal from oneself that democratic institutions develop the sentiment of envy in the human heart to a very high degree. It is not so much because they offer to each the means of becoming equal to others, but because these means constantly fail those who employ them. Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it entirely. Every day this complete equality eludes the hands of the people at the moment when they believe they have seized it, and it flees... the people become heated in the search for this good, all the more precious as it is near enough to be known, far enough not to be tasted. (1836, p. 189)

Equity breeds envy. The more democratic the institution or ideology, like the United States, or social justice, the greater the arousal of envy.

Envy and its consequences are a major theme in the Torah. Whether it's Cain and Abel, Leah and Rachel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, or Saul and David, the Torah is ripe with examples of envy and its consequences. The 10th commandment is a commandment against the emotion of envy. An ideology that promotes envy should axiomatically be understood as incongruent with traditional Judaism.

Traditional Orthodox Judaism is thousands of years old. The ideology of social justice is a contemporary one first originating from the Enlightenment. The notion that Judaism, a 3,300-year-old religion, conforms to its tenets is far-fetched and arbitrary. Making something fit an arbitrary standard is known as, “the bed of Procrustes.” For an example of this, inspect the titles of two articles written by contemporary Rabbis: “Re’eh (5769)—Judaism’s Vision for Social Justice,” (2009) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of England, and, “Social Justice Lies at the Heart of the Jewish People,” (2012) by Rabbi Gideon Sylvester.

Rabbi Sacks made a bold interpretation of the concept of *tzedakah*, traditionally known as charity. To him, the Torah is saying that: “... the laws of *tzedakah*—the word usually translated as ‘charity’ but which also means ‘distributive justice, equity’” (Sacks, 2009, para. 3). Rabbi Sacks equated charity and *tzedakah* with social justice, specifically distributive justice. Here, Sacks attempts to force the notion of *tzedakah* to fit into the bed of Procrustes.

Sacks and Sylvester are not alone in their attempt to shoehorn Meliorism into Orthodox Judaism. Socialism, social justice, progressivism, intersectionality, or whatever form of liberal ideology, are creeping into traditional Orthodox Judaism. On April 5th, 2019, Rabbi Avram Mlotek authored a piece for the *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, titled, “I’m an Orthodox rabbi who is going to start officiating LGBTQ weddings. Here’s why” (Mlotek, 2019).

The most compelling rationale for his departure from traditional Orthodoxy is found in the concluding paragraph of his article: “We are long overdue for a new paradigm” (Mlotek, 2019, para. 18). Mlotek believes in the progressive nature of the human condition, and that by his alterations, we can balance the world and eradicate some of the existing Jewish societal inequities. He believes that excluding homosexuals from the Jewish community is, “a painful reminder that LGBTQ Jews still lack the ability to fully participate as equals in all facets of Orthodox life” (Mlotek, 2019, para. 11).

The notion of the progressive nature of the human condition is not corroborated by the scripture in the book of Ecclesiastes: “Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever... What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (1:4, & 1:9). Due to the constancy of the human condition, the present age is no different than previous ages. Because of the constancy of human nature, the human condition moves cyclically. The present constantly repeats the past. We are witnessing a conversation that took place many years ago between Edmund Burke and Rousseau happening again before our eyes.

The Enlightenment was known as, “the age of reason” (Levin, 2000). At that time, people began looking inwards toward their feelings and using these feelings as the basis for facts and social policy, replacing custom, tradition, and prescription (Kessler, 2018). Edmund Burke understood traditions and customs as the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors. It represented the totality of the human condition, and no one person could ever possess sufficient mental capital to look within and decide that he knew best at the expense of the wisdom of our ancestors.

For those unaware of what makes Edmund Burke relevant and his legacy so enduring, I offer the following excerpt, where his oratory brilliance is on full display:

Because a nation is not an idea only of local extent, and individual momentary aggregation, but it is an idea of continuity, which extends in time as well as in numbers, and in space. And this is a choice not of one day, or one set of people, not a tumultuary and giddy choice; it is a deliberate election of ages and of generations; it

is a Constitution made by what is ten thousand times better than choice, it is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions, and moral, civil, and social habitudes of the people, which disclose themselves only in a long space of time. It is a vestment, which accommodates itself to the body. (1782)

Burke's speech related to political decisions, but the concept remains applicable and appropriate in the current context. He concluded, pithy as ever:

for man is a most unwise, and a most wise, being. The individual is foolish. The multitude, for the moment, is foolish, when they act without deliberation; but the species is wise, and when time is given to it, as a species it almost always acts right. (1782)

The individual is foolish, but the species is wise. When we look inward, we are only using our own personal discretion and capital. When we look toward traditions, customs, and our ancestors, we are using a wisdom that is infinitely greater than any amount of capital a single individual could ever hope to possess.

This is essentially what the Torah *she-be-al peh* is, and why it is still so important today. This is the rationale for why our traditions and customs are so important. They are not arbitrary social constructs, but rather reflect the divinely sanctioned wisdom of our ancestors, bequeathed to us over a long process of trial and error.

This line of thinking, where one looks inward at the expense of tradition, is visible in Mlotek's rationale for his position: "But I also believe that the Torah does not want human beings to live alone, and supports a covenantal relationship between parties as they build a faithful Jewish home" (2019, para. 8). Mlotek is looking inward and making a judgment based on his personal feelings. Essentially, he is doing exactly what Burke feared years ago:

We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages. (1790, para. 145)

Mlotek means well, and I truly believe his motives are compassion and love for his fellow Jew. His quote below illustrates this position:

I know that Judaism has, for thousands of years, had a rich understanding of the diversity of gender identities. I know that the Torah affirms the God-endowed dignity of all human beings... The onus of responsibility now rests upon those of us in religious leadership

positions: to continue to make space, validate, humanize, empathize and support those who have long felt suppressed by our traditions, and not the aggrieved parties themselves. (2019, paras. 8-10)

Looking inward, giving in to our feelings, and following our impulses are hallmarks of liberal ideology, predicated on the natural goodness of Man. Rousseau's natural goodness of Man meant that one only needs to, "give myself to the impression of the moment without resistance and [even] without scruple; for I am perfectly sure that my heart loves only that which is good" (Rousseau, as quoted by Ryn, 1978). Rousseau argued that, "Only the wicked person wants evil and premeditates it, the wicked person alone will be punished" (Rousseau, as quoted by Blum, 1986). Man is naturally good, and therefore, no one person would do anything intentionally evil. Our only requirement as a society is to look inward and follow our feelings, which, again, are naturally benevolent.

In the state of nature, human beings lived, among other things, free of the opinions and judgments of others (Rousseau, 1750). Rousseau lived his life fearing the judgments and opinions of others and wanted to rid our lives of their potential negativity. Read his account of what the judgments and opinions of others does to the psyche of Man:

One does not dare to appear as what one is. And in this perpetual constraint, men who make up this herd we call society, placed in the same circumstances, will all do the same things, unless more powerful motives prevent them. Thus, one will never know well the person one is dealing with. (1750)

Rousseau wanted to look within, follow his impulses, and free himself from judgment. This is the source of Rousseau's desire to live "authentically" or "sincerely." Arthur Melzer commented on this premise, noting that Rousseau credited "the good as being oneself regardless of what one may be" (Melzer, 1995). Simply be yourself and, "let go and stop trying... I truly find myself when, rejecting all strenuous talk about my higher self, and liberated from shame and guilt, I just freely observe and sincerely acknowledge all that goes on within my soul" (Melzer, 1995).

This is the source of the liberal moral foundation of autonomy, or the ability to be free and choose for ourselves, freed from the constraints of society (Haidt, 2013). The conservative counterpunch to autonomy is authority, meaning normative restraint (Haidt, 2013). To the conservative, the fundamental principle of conservatism is restraint, also known as temperance (Muller, 1997). This is predicated on the fallen nature of Man, and the belief that Man's nature is savage and beastly.

This savage nature of Man necessitates restraints, for when the restraints on Man's unruly passions and appetites are removed, they run amok (Muller, 1997).

Burke too, generations ago, understood this notion. He knew that, "Our physical well-being, our moral worth, our social happiness, our political tranquility, all depend on that control of all our appetites and passions, which the ancients designed by the cardinal virtue of Temperance" (1796). Our well-being, collective, individual, and societal, are tied to Man's ability to control his unruly passions and appetites. This notion, that self-control is the key to our success, has been corroborated by a longitudinal study performed at Stanford University called, "The marshmallow test: mastering self-control" (Mischel, 2014).

To conclude, the examples referenced in the preceding paragraphs check all the liberal philosophical moral foundations: Autonomy, the belief in progress of human nature, the belief that we need to use our feelings as facts, and the natural goodness of Man, corrupted by society. This leads us to ask the question as to whether these values have a place in traditional Orthodox Judaism? We are not asking whether these liberal values have a place in our personal, secular, or political lives, but specifically, if they have a place in traditional Orthodox Judaism?

Is it likely that Orthodox Judaism, a religion roughly a few thousand years old, adheres to the principles of the 1700's, Rousseau, and the other Meliorists who followed him? Is it likely that these liberal values, which are in many ways predicated on invalidating one of the first *masbals* in the Torah, conform to Orthodox Judaism? Is it likely that Judaism, which has 613 commandments, 365 of which are negative commandments that place restraints on our lives, values liberal autonomy? Is it likely that Judaism values a belief that we can make everyone happy?

Remember, the name Israel, when translated to English, means struggle. Why is the name of the Jewish people "struggle"? Because life is a struggle and the human condition is tragic. The history of the Jewish people is, inter alia, one struggle after another. This is exactly what Edmund Burke understood of life and the human condition. Burke knew the human condition was tragic, and that no amount of tinkering by Man could ever truly eradicate that tragic nature:


I have sometimes been in a good deal more than Doubt, whether the Creator did ever really intend Man for a State of Happiness. He has mixed in his Cup a Number of natural Evils... and every Endeavor which the Art and Policy of Mankind has used from the Beginning of the World to this Day, in order to alleviate, or cure them, has only served to introduce new Mischiefs, or to aggravate and inflame the old. (Burke, 1756, para. 3)

This is the nature of the human condition: tragic, brutal, and savage. The savage and beastly nature of Man necessitates restraints, for when these restraints are removed from our lives, the beastly nature of Man runs amok. To put it more poetically, read Burke’s criticism of Rousseau from “Letter to a Member of the National Assembly” (1791):

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites... Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.

This is the meaning of the negative commandments from the Torah: they act as restraints on our savage nature and channel us to walk the “*Mesillat Yesharim*,” the path of the just.

Real progress consists not in the creation of new norms, but rather, in adherence to the old ones (Kirk, 1989). In *Sefer Va-Yikra*, the Torah explicitly tells us that homosexuality is forbidden; in *Sefer Devarim*, the Torah tells us that, “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this.” The point here is not to bash LGBT people and criticize their lifestyles, but rather to acknowledge a simple and basic premise in this discussion: that there is nothing new under the sun. These are not new concepts, nor are they novel; they were an issue when we originally received the Torah at Mt. Sinai and are an issue today as well.

The Torah is as relevant today as it was when Moshe received it for us atop Mt. Sinai. The knowledge bequeathed to us by God, to Moshe, and the direct lineage from our ancestors to us in the present is just as valuable, relevant, and important today as it was then; it will remain as important to our children and grandchildren in the future. The human condition is constant, and no amount of societal tinkering will alter what is constant in nature. The liberal Meliorists, while well-meaning, are misguided. We must always remember that the human condition is constant, and that the present is not better than the past. 

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