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Natural Rights Rest Upon DEISM

by Bryan Black

Rights lie at the center of today's moral confusion. On the one side, the doctrine of higher rights belongs to the supernaturalists, who tie the doctrine of intrinsic human significance and definite moral standards to obscure, arbitrary and often repulsive teachings revealed in holy books from another world and time. On the other hand, modern notions of rights capable of engaging current sentiments and issues prove all too flexible and open to manipulation. They lie under suspicion of a false progress that throws the baby out with the bath water.

This confusion of opposite approaches to rights takes us back to the origins of the Republic. The same divisions afflicting us today prevailed in the moral universe then. Solutions then, though clearly available to us today, still must be claimed to become effective. In this way, the present generations find themselves forced to choose. Either they regain our original understanding of rights that puts America back on course, or they refuse moral enlightenment in favor of attachment to the usual prejudices.

To clarify the moral fundamentals requires only a consistent attribution of rights that pays close attention to the objectives distinguishing their several classes and kinds. But this task of a consistent analysis fails to engage the decisive mobilizations of the day, where partisan allegiances and established moral hatreds have already done their work of splitting natural humanity into camps of mutual enemies. If we would inherit the original analysis of rights, we must start from the original recognition of a divided humanity, which gave that analysis application, urgency, power and authority.

The universal naturalism of the Founders opposed itself to both the supernaturalists and the non-believers. Faced with the usual question of belief, whether they believed in God or not, the Founders replied 'a plague on both your houses.' To understand the doctrine of natural rights of the Declaration and of the Bill of Rights, we must admit resurgence of this long-standing opposition between believers and non-believers, which our Founders dismissed as morally unacceptable. In one camp individuals look to Jesus Christ and Almighty God first for their

own immortality, next for their inmost hopes for their children, family and friends, and thus by a straightforward extension trust the future of their nation to the same Divine Providence. In the other camp individuals look not to God but to the human power where the good society provides these same things, touching their hopes for themselves, for their children, for their family and friends and hence likewise for the future of their nation.

The individuals in each camp, just because we have here to do with the same things really at stake naturally and universally in the lives of all human beings, must first be acknowledged as entirely sincere. But, because they do not rise to the enlightened standpoint of universal naturalism, the first act of these individuals accuses the members of the other camp of insincerity. In this way now as in 1750, believers and unbelievers condemn themselves to wars of moral unreflection, both sides prosecuting the same design of darkness – the stratagem of counter-Enlightenment.

To the contrary, we must begin from a universal position that acknowledges the natural concern of all humanity for their own well-being, for the well-being of their children, for their families, their friends and the future of their nation. There the line must be drawn. Those who will not attest these natural, universal concerns of human individuals, who begin by excluding some fraction on whatever grounds of belief or unbelief, bring hatred with them to the table. Upon that foundation neither moral discussion nor republic can stand. These members of an already divided house, we insist, qualify in point of moral sincerity. We do not doubt their sincerity for a moment. But their dogmatism precedes them and makes them dangerous to enlightened association, whether afflicted by the dogmatism of belief or unbelief.

The standpoint of morality reached in this way declares the natural piety of Deism. We acknowledge a humanity of natural interests and concerns made universally the same by "Nature's God", prior to all distinctions of belief and unbelief. This God of our Founding Fathers differs profoundly from God the Father. The God of Jesus, of the Bible generally and hence of Christians, Jews and Moslems, is not "Nature's God", but is a supernatural god. We see at once that Nature's God establishes universal, natural rights and laws. But the biblical god establishes only supernatural rights. Supernatural rights are not universal, but privilege the supernaturalist sect of the believer.

Dogmatic opponents of a supernatural god uphold atheism or

agnosticism. From eagerness to sever from supernatural divinity these unbelievers deny Nature's God unthinkingly. In consequence, they refer our rights to human power, declaring not natural rights but human rights. This dogma of human rights already replicates the supernaturalist record of shameful sects and sordid schisms by breeding its own plethora of secular divisions and confusions.

Human rights refer to human and not divine power. When we analyze human rights in light of this contrast, however, enemies of the government have no more standing than enemies of god the Father. To forestall this Stalinist conclusion the university of human rights and hence their independence from human power has proved attractive. Rights along this line of interpretation, however, lose significance. Everybody already has all their human rights just by virtue of being human. Some won slaves and others suffer slavery, but that's just a matter of power and not a violation of the rights of the powerless. Atheists faced with this problem usually drop the analysis of rights. They assert specific rights on an ad hoc basis. They support equality, and claim slavery violates that right, whatever the basis of equality or any other right may be.

In the name of equality, however, we pass from slavery to sexism, to ageism, next to the equality of five year olds to make their own decisions, to recognize whomsoever they chose for parents, and finally to recognize no parents at all. Comes next the line between human and animal. What rights have humans that animals have not? All of a sudden it's a sin to kill the fleas on your dog, and the wisdom of children neglects to remove head lice that feed upon their neglect.

To the contrary, the power of natural rights cannot be reduced to human power. The natural rights struggles against slavery in the last century and against Jim Crow in this century concerned themselves with the human power as struggles for civil rights. This distinction of natural from civil rights reduces the human power to that of civil government. In this way, we hold the civil authorities to universal moral standards of universal, natural rights by Nature's God decreed. Civil government otherwise deserves rebuke as unnatural and so far perverse, immoral and so far unworthy of our cooperation, according to our best traditions of revolution and reform.

Regarding the animals, these involve no new kinds of rights but are a different class of rights holders. We see how animals easily come by civil rights. Civil governments have laws on the books extending such

rights by criminalizing cruelty to animals, criminalizing the taking of wild animals deemed endangered, etc. But the notion that animals have natural rights makes no such sense. Natural rights belong to moral discourse and association. Animals made by the same Creator who made us, have no entry upon moral discourse. They have not gone so far to entertain moral positions dogmatically, nor yet wasted the substance of their lives in thrall to moral blindness, whether of supernaturalist or atheist and agnostic varieties. We make nonsense of the natural facts of life, repudiate all moral sincerity and, in this, set new records for moral benightedness by extending natural rights to animals.

This preliminary analysis of rights only makes more urgent the prior question of faith. We have roughed out just the main distinctions of natural from supernatural and human rights, of natural from civil rights and of natural from animal rights. But this analysis, by recovering the suppressed moral memory of Deism, already carries us far beyond the contemporary moral condition. The prior question of faith in this way provides evidence of itself as the actual condition necessary to any progress. The dogmatic faiths of supernatural believers and of humanists unbelievers begin by abolishing the common ground of moral sincerity. Deism begins with this sincerity of all as a natural, universal attribute attesting our Maker's handiwork. Without this return to our inclusive faith that disarms at the outset the enmity now habitually brought to issues of rights, we have abandoned the God of our Fathers. We have alienated our rights to anything better than the European degeneration of nations driven by nationalisms, ideologies and religions.