



Change, Death, and Politics

A few weeks ago, I read and reviewed Ilana Mercer's *Into the Cannibal's Pot: Lessons for America from Post-Apartheid South Africa*. A week or two after that, my grandmother passed away. Considered in themselves, each of these events is entirely distinct from the other. But, interestingly, reflection upon the loss of my beloved grandmother has deepened my reflection upon the loss that Mercer relays in her book, the loss of her beloved homeland. Although the death of which Mercer's compelling *Cannibal* is an account has occurred sometime ago, the fact of the matter is that it is a death that its author mourns, the death of a country—her country, her world.



Regrettably — shamefully — it is only now, in the light of my own mourning, that this insight has taken hold of me.

But with it has come others.

Death is *deprivation*. The reason that death, whether the death of a person, a country, a marriage, or an era, causes the living as much pain as it does is that death robs them of something that they valued. When that something was the object of love, death is at its most merciless. However, death's sting is felt even by those who lose, not their beloved, but simply something to which they have grown habituated.

Now, *change* is an approximation to death. Not every change is for the worst, of course, but every change, like death, inescapably entails *loss*. In *depriving* us of what *is*, change plunges us headlong toward what is not yet and what may never be — i.e. toward what is *not*. Western philosophy itself entered the world struggling and wrestling with the phenomenon of change, for both those, like Heraclitus, who believed that there was nothing but change, as well as those, like Parmenides, who denied that change is real, recognized that change *extinguishes* identity.

Change is something that we have no option but to endure. Some of us are generally less averse to it than others, and none of us avoid all types of changes all of the time. Still, in addition to the fact that most of us view death — the Change of all changes — as the most dreadful of phenomena, there are other considerations that disclose that to all of us at *most* times, change is not unlike any other exhibition of untamed nature in that we feel the need to either flee from or domesticate it.

One such consideration is the obvious fact that we are all “creatures of habit,” as we say. There is a very good reason for why there isn't one of us to whom this saying doesn't apply: habit is *steady*, *reliable*, and *familiar*.

When we appeal to “human nature,” we see ourselves as appealing to that which is universal, that which is independent of the particularities of history and culture. “Human nature” is supposed to be



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on March 23, 2012

intractable, immutable, and, thus, *permanent*. As such, invocations of “human nature” can, and undoubtedly do, have the effect of soothing the soul, for the concept of “human nature,” with its semblance of permanence, serves as a sort of fortress within which the change-weary soul seeks refuge.

Habit has been called “second nature” because, as anyone who has ever tried to break a bad habit knows all too well, habit not infrequently *feels* as incorrigible as nature itself. The effortlessness with which our habits sustain us and the immense difficulty that we experience in trying to free ourselves from them render us forgetful of the fact that they are *acquisitions*, products of choice. It is not for nothing that the philosopher Blaise Pascal once subverted the standard conception of the relationship between nature and habit by suggesting that perhaps nature was just “*first habit*.”

Of course, habit doesn’t literally *arrest* change. But it does *abate* it. Habit simulates permanence insofar as it prevents change from tearing our lives asunder.

The counterpart to habit in politics is *custom* or *tradition*. Like habit, tradition does not preclude change, but it supplies us with the resources to accommodate ourselves to it. Tradition manages to preserve the integrity of our institutions by insuring that the changes that affect them occur slowly and steadily. In this respect, tradition is analogous to language, for although language is always suffering changes, those changes are incremental and, hence, readily absorbable. The identity of a language is not impaired by the changes that it experiences. Neither is the identity of a tradition undercut by the changes that *it* undergoes.

Given that in our personal lives we cling to habit to manage the relentless march of change, and given the equally vital role vis-à-vis change that tradition plays in the life of our politics, those visionaries among us who never tire of speaking of change as if it is an unqualified good can’t but strike us as the most bizarre of creatures. Yet at the same time, if we really think about it, we must also judge them the most *pitiful* of men and women.

As Michael Oakeshott once said: “Changes are without effect only upon those who notice nothing, who are ignorant of what they possess and apathetic to their circumstances; and they can be welcomed indiscriminately only by those who esteem nothing, whose attachments are fleeting and who are strangers to love and affection.”

Utopia’s champions, whether they are conventional leftists, libertarians of a certain sort, or neoconservatives, dream big dreams, dreams that they would love to impose upon the world and that have all too often proven to be nightmares for those who were supposed to be their beneficiaries. They are foolish, narcissistic, and, more frequently than not, destructive people.

Yet what makes these visionaries *pitiful* hasn’t anything to do with any of this. That they dream, and what they dream, are irrelevant. Even the ruinous consequences of their magisterial designs aren’t to the point here.

The tragic character of the visionary derives from the fact that he doesn’t know love. He is, as Oakeshott describes the person who lusts for change, a “stranger” to “love and affection.”

The visionary regards the present as nothing but a device — a “mere means,” to quote Immanuel Kant — to be conscripted into the service of an uncertain future. Love tends to better the beloved, but it also delights in the beloved for what it *is*. Once it insists upon transforming the beloved into what the latter is not it murders both the beloved as well as itself. For the visionary, the present offers nothing in which to delight; it is to be *subjugated* and *exploited*, not loved. For the visionary, the grass is always greener in the pasture of the future.



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These reflections on death and change have confirmed for me with new force my sympathy for classic political conservatism. Unlike the leftist, the libertarian, and the neoconservative — with which he is all too frequently confused — the conservative knows that the greatest of life's satisfactions are to be found in the present, however challenging the present may be. If he is to achieve meaning in his life, it is going to be by way of his current relationships and attachments, for it is only these that can be said to exist, for the past is no more and the future is not yet.



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