

*What Makes America Great?*  
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I thank the Philadelphia society for the opportunity to consider with you here the importance of permanent things.

I was prompted by the mention of Scott Fitzgerald's passage here at the Georgian Terrace to reread an excellent review of the most recent film version of *The Great Gatsby*. (The review is by Martha Bayless, in the Summer 2013 *Claremont Review of Books*.)

What makes *Gatsby* great? This, according to critic Martha Bayles, is the question a filmmaker would have to answer, or at least to ponder, in order to make a movie in any way worthy of Fitzgerald's 1925 novel. (Baz Luhrmann's recent effort doesn't come close: "louder, crasser, and more frantic" even than his earlier films, as Bayles writes, this summer's *Great Gatsby* leaves her asking, "Why would anyone want to inflict such damage on a novel that never did anything to him?")

Of course, as Bayles notes, there is no little irony in the title, since Jay Gatsby is at best an ambivalent character, having built a fortune on corruption in order to get close socially to the girl of his dreams, Daisy. But the longing evoked by Gatsby's gazing across the bay at the green light at the end of Daisy's dock cannot be reduced to a desire for the girl, no matter what Jay himself might think. It cannot be Gatsby's love for Daisy that makes him great, because "she's so clearly not worth it." So there must be some other reason (not well represented in any of the films) that the narrator, Nick Carraway, affirms to Jay: "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together."

What, then, makes *Gatsby* great? Bayles suggests two distinct ways in which he is worth the whole damn bunch put together. First, he retains at least a residual moral decency, which he demonstrates by taking the blame for the hit-and-run death that Daisy has caused. Second, there is Gatsby's very longing, directed towards the implausibly green-tinted light at the end of the distant dock, which to Bayles recalls Beatrice's cloak of green, the color of hope, which she is wearing when Dante finally meets her in the Earthly Paradise at the end of the *Purgatorio*.

Jay Gatsby is morally capable of a great sacrifice for another human being. And Jay Gatsby longs for a God he cannot name. There is a greatness in *Gatsby* that is both moral and spiritual/intellectual. I will resist the temptation to speculate on how the

one is related to the other – suffice it to say that this question has been the axis of Western political philosophy from Plato through Leo Strauss.

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Alexis de Tocqueville's first impressions of America were not very promising concerning any place for "permanent things". Here is one of Tocqueville's first impressions of America, recorded in a letter he wrote early in his visit to the New World in 1831:

[The Americans'] instability of character ... breaks through in a thousand places... change seems to him the natural state of man, and how could it be otherwise? Everything is ceaselessly astir around him – laws, opinions, public officials, fortunes – the earth itself here changes its face very day...

But Tocqueville would soon come to understand the roots of an order that contained and supported the restless motion of the Americans. *Democracy in America* is rich with accounts of such roots. For example, he argues that it was the long development of freedom within an English tradition, along with the exceptional circumstances of freedom in a New World, that had saved America from the kind of radical social revolution that had convulsed his native France. And he gave great credit to the wisdom and virtue of the United States' founding statesmen, who had framed a new constitution and taught a restless people to accept it. But the two deepest and strongest roots of American order for Tocqueville, I would argue, are these: the township or self-governing small community (the primeval source of the American genius for free association), and the Christian religion, especially in the form of the austere activism of the Puritans. The township and Christianity, nature and grace: the natural root of self-government that precedes the division between aristocracy and democracy, a basic form of community that facilitates the synthesis of quality and equality; and the divine revelation of a transcendent human destiny that places strict and sacred limits on natural passions and appetites.

Virtuous liberty prospers in the self-governing township; communal responsibilities call for the best efforts of the most able citizens; the best effectively rule and set the tone for the community without becoming an aristocracy. At the same time, Christian dogma and Christian morality set an absolute limit on the restless spirit of innovation and provide a stable framework, both cosmic and domestic, for the perpetuation of institutions favorable to the virtues of self-government. Revealed religion grounds and shelters the natural growth of responsible freedom.

"Religion in America," Tocqueville writes, "must ... be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of free institutions." The taste for virtuous freedom, or for the free exercise of the natural virtues, for the flourishing of man's higher natural faculties, may not have been well articulated in the austere Calvinism of America's first founders, but

the moral strictness of the Puritan religion provided a stable framework for the development of such virtuous freedom.

Russell Kirk wrote in *Roots of the American Order* that what America's founding generation learned from Plato, however indirectly, was to understand justice or political order as grounded in the order of the soul. He agreed with Tocqueville that America's practical experience with communal self-government, together with its unquestioned Christian dogma and morality, provided fertile ground for the growth of orderly souls in the midst of the ceaseless motion that roiled American society.

The root of American order was an order of the soul that arose from the coexistence of local self-government with an austere and moralistic Christianity – but this order cannot be identified simply with either the one or the other of these sources. Americans are heirs of a classical and Christian tradition of virtue ordered by an awareness of permanent things that they honor more in their practice than in any theory or doctrine they possess. Tocqueville and Kirk know that political freedom cannot flourish and stay within safe limits without some account of permanent things, of the divine. And they also know that the austere commands of the Calvinist God need to be informed by some experience of natural and concrete human goods, some experience of virtue that survived man's fall from grace. Tocqueville's Americans do not possess a theory or theology that adequately mediates between nature and grace, but the experience of local self-government within the moral limits of a commanding God provides such mediation in practice. Americans live in awareness of permanent things, of enduring natural and divine goods, even if they cannot give an account of them.

To return to Fitzgerald's image: For the Americans of Tocqueville's day, the green light of spiritual hope, barely visible through the mists that separate fallen man from God, is sufficient to support the practice of virtuous freedom.

Let us consider more closely the dependence of ordered liberty on a transcendent hope. The natural goodness of the township, that is, of the exercise of virtuous freedom, cannot stand alone. Natural virtue needs revealed religion, if only because it needs protection against restless religious longings that threaten to invade the political sphere and to produce extreme political ambitions.

“The short space of threescore years can never content the imagination of man; nor can the imperfect joys of this world satisfy his heart. Man alone, of all created beings, displays a natural contempt of existence, and yet a boundless desire to exist; he scorns life, but he dreads annihilation. These different feelings incessantly urge his soul to the contemplation of a future state, and religion directs his musings thither. Religion, then, is simply another form of hope; and it is no less natural to the human heart than hope itself. Men cannot abandon their religious faith without a kind of aberration of intellect, and a sort of violent distortion of their true natures...”

Virtuous freedom on a natural human scale will never fully satisfy the human heart. If infinite longings are not directed towards the transcendent, they will inevitably be projected upon the political order. This is the root of all varieties of modern secular ideology, in which justice as the order of the soul gives way to the passion for “social justice.” If the green light at the end of the dock is not associated with a transcendent destiny of the soul, then the passion for Daisy will sooner or later take a political form, the form of a secular salvation. And once religious hopes are fixed upon worldly ends, then some Tom Buchanan will always be setting the tone and calling the shots. The most idealistic quest for “social justice” will find itself defined by the harsh necessities of power politics.

In Tocqueville’s America the experience of justice as order in the soul was oriented by religious hope, but it was also already somewhat intermingled with an ideological passion for what we now call “social justice,” that is, with dreams of limitless “progress” and an insatiable passion for equality. “Social justice” denies the primacy of concrete moral order, of personal virtue and responsibility, in a particular and finite context; it seeks an abstract fairness and equality, and this quest tends perpetually to undermine existing habits and institutions of virtue. Justice as a personal virtue, as order in the soul, always requires the acceptance of limitations and necessities inherent in the human condition. In this sense, real human freedom is inseparable from acceptance of suffering. To do what is right is always to refuse excuses that one might find in circumstances beyond one’s control. The abstract idealism of “social justice,” on the other hand, proposes to defer the obligation to do what is right until the fairness of the circumstances has been secured – a condition which of course can never be met. There is thus an inherent tension between justice as order in the soul, as a personal virtue, and “social justice” as an ideological vision and a collective project.

This tension between justice as order of the soul under God and the collective or historical project of social justice became the focus of a titanic struggle in the twentieth century. And no one lived this struggle in his own mind and soul as intensely or with more lucidity than Whitaker Chambers, the former communist who provided his *Witness* against the purest and most virulent form of the dream of “social justice.” When he could no longer suppress his awareness the moral evil of communism, its destruction of all permanent things, then Chambers was forced to make the most fundamental of choices, that between God and man as ultimate authorities. By rejecting communist ideology and repenting of his participation in the world-wide communist conspiracy, Chambers knew that he was also forsaking the conspiracy of progressives and intellectuals that derived from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century enlightenment, the vision of rationalistic liberalism in general. He was abandoning the quest for a social justice that would transform the human condition and accepting to live within a permanent moral order that required acceptance of the human condition.

“The idea that man is sinful and needs redemption has been subtly changed into the idea that man is by nature good, and hence capable of indefinite perfectibility. This

perfectibility is being achieved through technology, science, politics, social reform, education. Man is essentially good, says 20th-century liberalism, because he is rational, and his rationality is (if the speaker happens to be a liberal Protestant) divine, or (if he happens to be religiously unattached) at least benign. Thus the reason-defying paradoxes of Christian faith are happily by-passed.”

Chambers does not pause here to explain what “Reason-defying paradox” lies at the heart of Christian faith, and I will not here attempt any theological exploration of Christian mysteries. But we can already see the outlines of this paradox in the very opposition between justice as the order of the soul under permanent things and justice as “social justice,” as the boundless quest for some perfect “equality” and “fairness.” The order of the soul requires the acceptance of limitations in the human condition, and even of suffering. The green light on the dock of transcendence is a beacon of hope, but also a reminder of our permanent distance, as mortals, from our spiritual home, and of the harsh limitations of our mortal condition. To be guided and uplifted by the hope, we must also be humbled to accept the limitations of our present condition and of our rational powers. The demand to overcome such limitations excuses immorality in the name of Progress and undermines the order of the soul. When social justice replaces justice as a personal virtue, we attempt to lay our mortal hands on the green light of transcendence, and Daisy’s beauty is reduced to Tom Buchanan’s libertinism and ruthless corruption.

Another mid-twentieth century American author, the Catholic novelist Flannery O’Connor, saw with bracing clarity what was at stake in the alternative between justice as order in the soul under permanent things and “social justice.”

“In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.”

We have, we think, left far behind the epic battle between Communism and the Free World. But if Whitaker Chambers and Flannery O’Connor are right, there will always be a high price to be paid for any attempt to emancipate the ideological quest for “social justice” from the order of the soul, and from the authority of the permanent things that can only uplift us as they humble us. Tocqueville was relieved to find that in America the awful maxim that nothing is immoral that serves the interest of society finds no acceptance. But today our leading academic moral and political theorists (followers of the late John Rawls, whom Russell Kirk was in his last days preparing to refute) take it for granted that there is no basis for morality but “public reason,” that is, whatever society can be persuaded serves its interest. Society for many is the new God, and no revolution was necessary, or has

been necessary so far, to bring about this fundamental re-orientation from the permanent things to the assumption of human mastery.

Does the United States of America still live and have its being under the permanent things? Are we still blessed by the green light of hope, and sobered by the necessary distance that separates us from it?

Tocqueville, 180 years ago, went to America to look for an alternative to the moral and spiritual confusion wrought by those he called the would-be “champions of modern civilization,” those proud and ambitious intellectuals who proposed to make men masters of their fate by reducing them to material beings beholden to no higher authority. Appalled by the spiritual disorder of the old world, Tocqueville found hope, despite everything, in the ordered liberty of the Americans. The great Frenchmen in effect said to America, “you’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.” *Would to God that it may yet be so.*