
Ideology *vs.* Constitutionalism

Power Without Limits: The Allure of Political Idealism and the Crumbling of American Constitutionalism

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For the framers of the U.S. Constitution no task seemed more important than to limit and tame power. The chief reason why they established a government of divided powers and checks and balances was their view of human nature, which was primarily Christian and classical. It seemed to them self-evident that human beings are morally cleft. They are potentially decent, even admirable, but also have darker inclinations that pose a great threat to themselves and others. Human beings cannot be trusted with unrestricted power. The constitutionalism of the framers assumed that the drive for power had to be contained first of all through the self-discipline of individuals, but corresponding external restraints, including constitutional checks, were necessary to protect the public.

Since the adoption of the Constitution American government and society have changed radically. The Constitution still enjoys a kind of ceremonial respect. It is cited as if it possessed an august authority. In actuality, political practice is today so different from the intent of the framers that, in substance, the original Constitution has been virtually suspended. Over the

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years sometimes tortuous and highly tendentious constitutional interpretation has combined with powerful political and intellectual trends to produce an enormous expansion and centralization of the federal government and a concomitant erosion of checks and balances. The claim that these developments have realized the hopes of Alexander Hamilton is blatantly anachronistic. The American federal National Security and Welfare State with its presidential system bears little resemblance to the scheme of the framers.

Moral and cultural change helps explain political change.

The reasons for the change are many and complex. They include the effects of wars, economic and scientific developments, and globalization. The change can also be traced to moral, cultural, and social developments that have had profound, transformative consequences. Briefly put, the way in which Americans today view themselves and the world is very different from what was the case at the time of the framing of the Constitution. That change is far-reaching and goes a long way towards explaining the mentioned political change. One major consequence is a muting of the old American fear of power and the creation of vast new opportunities for politicians who desire more power. Although these developments have distinctively American characteristics, they reflect trends throughout the Western world. Those trends have, in fact, been even more pronounced in Europe.

Although traditional religion and morality have long been in retreat, moralistic language seems more pervasive in American politics today than ever. Few public policy stands are advanced that are not said to be demanded by “justice” or “fairness.” To oppose them is to be “greedy,” “callous” or “intolerant”—to be morally inferior, even despicable. Moral indignation is, it seems, the favored posture of politicians and pressure groups.

But the moralism of today is very different from the notion of morality prevalent at the time of the writing of the Constitution. The purpose of this article is to identify a powerful strain within this new moralism and to elucidate its role in engendering the transformation of American society and politics. While sharply lessening the old American fear of power, the change has facilitated and even stimulated a desire for power. According to the new conception of morality, it is virtuous to want government, almost always the federal government, to

expand its reach. In foreign policy, it is common for American leaders to claim, sometimes with great ideological fervor, that America is exceptional and has a moral mission in the world. American leadership is needed to remake insufficiently “free” and “democratic” countries. According to assertive nationalists, neoconservatives, and liberal interventionists in both parties, America should seek armed global hegemony—not, of course, to indulge a desire to dominate but to fulfill a morally noble destiny. The advocates of uncontested hegemony will deny that they *desire*, for its own sake, the enormous military power that would be necessary to achieving the stated goal; the need to wield enhanced American power is only *incidental* to the moral imperative of creating a better world. In domestic politics, many politicians similarly assume that their wish greatly to expand the scope and functions of government has solely moral motives. Here, too, the need to accumulate power at the political center is viewed as merely *incidental* to wanting a more just society. Yet one might wonder why the desire for moral public policy rarely, if ever, issues in calls for *reducing* the power of political leaders. So striking is this pattern that it raises the question whether the moralism in question and the wish to expand and centralize power might somehow be integrally connected. Whatever else this moralism might be, is it a subtle way of justifying a desire to rule others?

Today's moralism a justification of power?

The purpose of this article is to analyze the “idealism” that has helped transform America and, in particular, to demonstrate that its moral-imaginative dynamic is quite different from its reputation. It would appear that indistinguishable from its ostensible caring for the welfare of others is a desire to direct their lives. Indeed, the deepest source of idealism’s appeal may be that it is a sense of moral superiority that implies a right to dominate.

“Idealism” may imply a right to dominate.

To argue this thesis it will be necessary to revisit points that this author has made in other contexts and to recast, combine, and supplement them for the present purpose.

The Old Morality and Its Social and Political Entailments

The traditional Western view of man’s moral predicament carried with it a deep ambivalence about power. On the one hand, no political objectives could be achieved without the

exercise of power. On the other hand, the prominent lower proclivities of human beings made power potentially dangerous, so that people in political authority had to be subjected to restraint. Both in personal and political life, it was important to foster moderation and a sense of limits. Even the political theory of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), which *breaks* with the Western tradition with regard to both moral philosophy and the idea of restraints on power, offers a kind of confirmation of an older sense that governments must recognize limits. It never occurs to this advocate of supposedly absolute political rule to extend the sphere of sovereignty beyond matters touching law and order. He is in this respect a kind of forerunner of classical liberalism. In his view of human beings Hobbes rejects much of the older heritage, but in stressing man's wholly egocentric nature he might be said to advocate a simplified and extreme Augustinianism.

Representatives of the dominant modern notion of political morality do not much worry about possible egotism and ruthlessness in people who seem to them to have the right ideals. They tend to place any dark inclinations outside of the supposedly idealistic and hence benevolent politician, place it among those, especially, who oppose the supposedly moral cause. One of the reasons why virtuous politicians are thought to need great power is to be able to overcome the opposition of recalcitrants.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution were acutely aware that the responsible exercise of power had moral preconditions. They feared original sin in themselves as well as others. They hoped that in personal life moral character would restrain the desire for self-aggrandizement, just as in national political life the checks and balances of the U.S. Constitution would contain and domesticate the all-too-human desire for power as an end in itself. Personal self-control and constitutionalism were but different aspects of the need to subdue the voracious ego. Freedom and rule of law required republican virtue. They had to be achieved by the members of society over time through protracted inner and outer moral struggle. Freedom and rule of law could not be bestowed as a gift on a people that had not undertaken any of this work. Constitutionalism could be safeguarded in America only through the

*Self-control
and constitutionalism
needed to
check egotism.*

continuation of the kind of culture that fostered it.¹

The Framers assumed that for the Constitution to work its institutions had to be manned by individuals who embodied its spirit of restraint. That spirit stemmed from America's *unwritten* constitution, that is, from the religious, moral, cultural, and social life that had inclined Americans to constitutionalism. To be capable of sustaining the constitutional order those working under its provisions had to be predisposed to virtues like moderation, respect for law, and readiness to compromise. They had to have what this author calls the constitutional personality. The main reason why the U.S. Constitution has become a mere shadow of its old self is that it cannot function as intended without the aforementioned personality traits.²

It is important to understand that the moral character that the framers saw as the ultimate protection against arbitrary power and as the source of the constitutional temperament also generated a society of a certain type. Most Americans will vaguely remember that at the heart of Christian morality is the admonition to "love neighbor as thyself." What is commonly forgotten or is not very well understood are the far-reaching social implications of that moral vision. By "neighbor" is meant individuals within the person's own sphere of life, people of flesh and blood with names and faces. We are to treat them as we would like to have them treat us. Note carefully that traditional Christianity does not call upon us to love "mankind" or "humanity," which, by modern, idealistic standards, looks more generous and ambitious. What sounds so nice in modern ears—loving "humanity"—is very different

Moral character the ultimate protection against arbitrary power.

¹ The points made in this paragraph are more fully argued and substantiated in Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003) and Claes G. Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life*, 2nd exp. ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990; first published in 1978). Regarding the British origins of the American constitutional order, see Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Constitution* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1990) and *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003; first published in 1974). See also, Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey, *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995; first published in 1970).

² On the relationship between the written Constitution and the unwritten one, including the constitutional personality, see Claes G. Ryn, "Political Philosophy and the Unwritten Constitution," *Modern Age*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Summer 1992), available also at <http://www.nhinet.org/unwrit.htm>.

Love of neighbor very different from love of humanity.

from loving “neighbor” in that its object is not some particular person in the here and now. “Humanity” is highly amorphous and distant. Humanity is not here, in our way, where it might inconvenience us. By the standards of traditional morality, which are down to earth and rather crusty, loving mankind does not engage us where we live. It does not interfere with our ordinary lives and require acts of self-sacrifice. It takes place chiefly in the imagination. For that reason, it does not represent any moral challenge. All it requires is having supposedly noble sentiments, “feeling the pain” of a diffuse suffering collective somewhere far away. The proof to you and others that you are morally noble is that thinking about those who suffer puts a tear in your eye. Moral virtue is not, as for Christianity, charitable action toward particular people up close, but having warm feelings for nobody in particular. Those in trouble are not actually present, making uncomfortable demands. From the point of view of traditional Western morality, the sentimental notion of virtue has little to do with real morality, which is to shoulder responsibility for persons, for “neighbors.” That older morality presupposes ability to overcome our native egotism and laziness. It requires strength of *character*. To be up to the task, the individual must have already learned to moderate his self-indulgence and callousness and to make the needs of others his own. It is because the problems of actual persons are concrete and nearby that loving neighbor can be very demanding. It may take up much of our time and energy. To compound the difficulty, neighbor may not even be likeable. Yet love him we should, not by emoting nobly and walking away, but by taking concrete, perhaps greatly inconvenient action. Without strength of will we may shrink from acting. Loving “mankind” does not require character. It takes place in the imagination and is to that extent morality made comfortable and easy.

Traditional morality centered in small groups.

People who believe that loving neighbor will give meaning to life will be prone to give their best in settings that are near and intimate—families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, and workplaces. There are many reasons why such groups and associations will be for most people the main sphere of life, but it is crucial to understand that it is here more than elsewhere that traditional morality has its center and primary outlet.

Note that in small, intimate associations the person must repeatedly take others into account. There he cannot indulge his native self-indulgence and slothfulness without inviting immediate censure. In families and small groups where relations of mutual dependence are dense and numerous, the person is taught to behave with the well-being of others in mind. You cannot always have your own way. Each member must learn to perform little acts of self-denial. The person is habituated to doing his part, assisting others, and compromising. Character is bred and repeatedly tested. Where life is personal and up-close no one can get away with portraying himself as morally better than he is. Others will be quick to see through mere posturing. Never mind some conceited self-image of being a deeply caring friend of humanity; it is your actions toward real people that reveal who you really are, and they decide your reputation. To the extent that moral character is fostered through life in groups, the will is honed for the responsibilities of the larger society. The more people learn to restrain their lower natures and take others into account, the greater the likelihood that ties of community will be fostered and strengthened.

Traditional Western morality does not assume that people up close will be the only beneficiaries of moral responsibility. It assumes merely that genuine morality will originate in and be nurtured in intimate settings. Thus formed, moral character will have an effect wherever a person directs his attention. Some people will concern themselves with a world far beyond local associations and issues, but they will have learned from life in their groups and communities that what makes for a better society is not some nebulous warm sentiment, but a readiness to act responsibly in and to understand the world as it is, full not least of human weakness.

To be able to understand moral “idealism” and its various entailments it is important to recognize first the social and political ramifications of the rather different traditional ethic just described. The latter generates certain priorities. Love of neighbor is not for exceptional, grandiose circumstances but for the concrete life of the here and now. It shapes and enhances day-to-day relationships. Because it emphasizes that doing right by persons up close is essential to human well-being, it encourages people to give their best within their own groups, neigh-

Love of neighbor is for the here and now.

*Love of
neighbor a
decentralizing
force.*

borhoods, businesses, associations, and local communities. From this understanding of man's higher calling is derived the old principle of subsidiarity, central not least to Roman Catholic social thought, which says that problems should be addressed, as far as possible, by those immediately concerned. Only if people cannot manage on their own should they seek assistance elsewhere, and then, again, as near to themselves as possible. This sense of moral responsibility will let them attain their full stature as human beings. It is not difficult to see that the traditional understanding of morality encouraged and built energetic, strong communities. What people felt that they should handle personally, privately, and locally minimized the need for government. This morality was a powerful decentralizing force.

It was in the 1830s that Alexis de Tocqueville commented at length on the vitality and proliferation of private and local associations in America. Americans had a strong inclination to collaborate and to address their needs within their own groups. De Tocqueville was particularly struck by the active role of members of churches. He noted the great reluctance of Americans to part with any authority over their own lives. Except perhaps for the *prominence* of these observations in *Democracy in America*, they should not be very surprising. Although there was no single reason for these social patterns, it should be easy to see the connection between a highly decentralized, group-oriented society and America's moral roots.

*Traditional
morality
shaped
constitutional
personality.*

The same moral heritage that fostered cooperation, self-reliance, mutual assistance, self-restraint, modesty, respect for law, and a willingness to compromise helped shape the constitutional personality. These traits formed the mentioned unwritten constitution, which gave life and direction to the written one. Just as the traditional views and habits of Americans made them impose internal checks on themselves, so did they make them willing to accept and respect external legal constraints. Had these personality traits not been strong and widespread, nothing like the U.S. Constitution could have been conceived or made to work.

That the American form of government today bears little resemblance to the constitutional design of 1787 reflects a change in America's unwritten constitution, in the basic self-

understanding and priorities of Americans. There can be no question here of attempting a comprehensive summary of what brought about the present state of affairs. The emphasis will have to be on how the change in the understanding of morality and society helped produce a new attitude towards power and government. It is necessary to take account of an aspect of so-called "modernity" that has had profound and far-reaching effects but that is still poorly understood.

Idealism: Morality Reconceived

Not all strains of modernity are incompatible with the older moral tradition, but special attention needs to be paid to the explicitly stated desire for liberation from earlier beliefs and ways of life that is most commonly called modernity. Two seemingly disparate but intimately connected currents have given that part of modernity its distinctive flavor and dynamic: one is a belief in rational enlightenment; the other is entertaining "idealistic" dreams of human existence transformed. Both currents assume the coming of a new, superior world, an era of liberty, harmony, and general well-being.

Modern idealism follows no single path, but one may discern a central, enduring pattern. The philosopher who gives the clearest and most thorough-going expression to the dream of a new world and who comes closest to being paradigmatic for this idealism is probably Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). More than anybody else he inspired the kind of imagination that has, in more or less extreme form, exerted enormous influence in the Western world, first of all in literature, art, philosophy, and religion, but soon also in politics. "Idealism" as a term for the moral-political force that Rousseau helped create should not be confused with the nineteenth century school of German philosophy that is often given the same name.

*Rousseau
paradigmatic
for idealism.*

Rousseau flatly rejects the ancient Western belief that human beings are morally torn between higher and lower potentialities and that they are their own worst enemies. Human beings have nothing to fear from themselves. They are naturally good, but traditional societies pervert and imprison their true nature. The way to a better life is to liberate man's natural goodness from inner and outer restraint. Rousseau dreams himself away from what he considers a dark and intol-

erable present. He starts the modern theme of estrangement from existing society—alienation, indeed, from all of life as it currently exists. He imagines a long lost idyllic past and a corresponding glorious future. Employing a new form of the imagination, he becomes the great pioneer in the West for envisioning a society wholly different from anything known in history.

The term “imagination” has been carefully defined by this author in other places. Here the context should provide sufficient definition.³

*Dreaming
of what
cannot be.*

Human beings are dreamers. They often dream themselves far away. Capable of imagining something quite different from the present, they are free in a way that animals are not. But this power presents humanity with a big problem. They can use it to imagine and long for what simply cannot be, dream the impossible dream. The dream may become so captivating that they will try to enact it, which may bring disaster upon themselves and others.

A central feature of what used to be known as civilization is *not* letting human beings escape too far into dreamworld. They need to tether their visions of a better life to what humanity has found to lie in the realm of the possible. Civilization protects people against frivolous dreaming not least through its moral teachings and great works of art and literature, which seek to anchor the imagination in the world in which human beings have to act. More often than not experience in the world of action shows dreams to be mere wishful thinking. Civilization teaches that we cannot have the world just as we would like it. Children dream endlessly of what cannot be, but to mature as a human being means giving up childish things. Adults must face the facts of life, most importantly the limits imposed by man’s moral predicament.

Yet in the last 250 years Western men and women became more and more reluctant to accept a world that limits their hopes. They did not want to remain imperfect creatures torn in the depths of their being between high and low, condemned

³ For a systematic analysis of the differences and intimate interconnections among will, imagination and reason, see Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, 2nd exp. ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997; 1986).

to struggle against dark inclinations in themselves and others. Idealistic dreaming let them set aside the uncomfortable traditional claims about human nature. Leading idealistic artists, philosophers, and politicians nurtured their hope for a marvelous new world, free of the old restrictions.

Just where the imagination crosses over the line from contemplating real possibilities for improvement to dreaming the impossible dream we cannot say for certain ahead of time, but the mature person knows to adjust his aspirations to what historical experience has shown to be unavoidable facts of life. The dreamer of the impossible dream, by contrast, is not willing to let evidence from the world of human practice—the historical world—put a damper on his dreaming. For mature persons, daydreams are never more than momentary departures from life as it is, but for idealists dreams of a radically different, wonderful world are a permanent accompaniment of daily life, a vantage point from which the present can be seen to be all the more disappointing.

Rousseau represents the idealistic imagination in a particularly thoroughgoing form, but in one version or another this kind of dreaminess has continued to reverberate. It may indeed be the dominant moral sensibility of the contemporary Western world.

Rousseau declared that everything was the opposite of how it had seemed. Traditional civilization is not a support for making the best of life. It enslaves the goodness that belonged to man in a pre-civil state of nature. Evil is not in human beings but is due to wicked social norms and institutions. “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” Even the works of culture helped enslave human beings. “The sciences, letters and the arts . . . spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which they are burdened.”⁴

Returning to the primitive state of natural goodness is neither possible nor desirable, Rousseau averred, but the unimpeded spontaneity of the natural man can be restored in a radically reconstituted society. Doing away with inequality and dependence on others will create virtuous unity. Though Rousseau did not propose returning into the woods, the natural,

*Natural man
the standard
for revolution-
izing society.*

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *First Discourse, Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 3.

uninhibited man was for him the standard for revolutionizing society. Rousseau gave a detailed account of the goodness of man in his original state. It is when most unaffected by civilization that men are at their best. To create a new society man must repair to the natural man, the child within, as it were, and make a fresh start.

Rousseau's dreams were greatly pleasing to many in that they seemed to free human beings from the hard, unending work of disciplining dark forces in themselves. He directed the blame for evil away from the individual onto the institutions of existing society. Human beings are the *victims* of perverse circumstance. But they can make a wonderful new existence for themselves by revolutionizing the social and political exterior.

*An element of
self-deception.*

From the perspective of the classical and Christian view of man this is not a story for adults. It flies in the face of human experience. It is an elaborate fantasy. But it enthused Western readers. They *wanted* to believe this dream. How wonderful to be relieved of the never-ending struggle to improve self, to hear that man is already what he should be—that nature made him such! The vision promised a short-cut to fulfillment.

It should be carefully noted that the Rousseauistic dream of a transformed human existence involved from the very beginning an element of conscious or semi-conscious self-deception. It offered a striking example of an imagination of escape. Significantly, Rousseau was not wholly unaware of disregarding actual human experience. He *admitted* to wondering at times if there was not something frivolous and unreal about his own flights of fancy. It was, he said, as if his "heart," his dreamy imagination, did not belong to the same person as his "head," his moments of critical reflection. Yet he could not, *would* not, resist his dream. In the *Second Discourse* he introduced his elaborate survey of the state of nature and the origins of the corrupt civilized society by saying that his account should not be regarded as an historical narrative. He wrote: "Let us . . . begin by putting aside all the facts, for they have no bearing on the question." His "investigations" should not "be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings."⁵ In other words, he asked his readers to follow

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

him into an imaginary history and to find there the true nature of man and the inspiration for remaking society. Countless political activists have engaged in this kind of dreaming and pushed a political agenda of liberation.

It is important to realize that what Rousseau understands as natural and fulfilling is conceived as incompatible with trying to make the best of the historically known world. He does not employ his imagination to help us live to advantage in a world in which man is divided against himself and has to contend with various other impediments. He simply rejects what he considers an unacceptable human existence. He imagines life on wholly different terms. It is not possible here to explore why something that looks to the traditional Christian like a children's tale should have had such deep and enduring appeal. The time must have been ripe in the West for something like romantic escape and revolt. Rousseau offered happiness and enchantment without difficult moral striving. Fulfillment would be a free gift of nature.

*Historically
existing world
unacceptable.*

It is relevant to the issue of morality and power that Rousseau found in human beings a natural inclination to sympathize with those who suffer. He pioneered a new notion of caring. Charity does not, as in Christianity, develop through character formation but is a spontaneous impulse. For Rousseau, the measure of being a good person is not to exhibit decency in practical conduct, but to have warm feelings, a supposedly benevolent "heart." The new caring takes place not in the world of action, but in the imagination of the caring person. Replacing the traditional understanding of love with teary-eyed sentiment became a powerful trend in Western morality. The new morality was appealing not only in that it did not require an effort of will, but in that it was inherently self-applauding, giving the sympathizing person a nice feeling of nobility.

Dreaming the impossible dream had dramatic social and political consequences. It inspired the French Jacobins and the French Revolution. Later it inspired socialism and communism. Even when modern idealism did not accept the Rousseauistic premise of man's natural goodness, it assumed a sharp contrast between a diseased present and a future of radiant health. Even National Socialism had its dream of a glorious time to

come, the thousand-year *Reich*. In recent decades many have fantasized about global peace and democracy.

Rousseau himself did not much care for Enlightenment rationalism, but idealistic imagination formed in the West an anti-traditional alliance with rationalism. What the two currents had in common was that they rejected the old stress on moral character as the key to a satisfying life. All over the Western world this informal alliance exhibited a “head” that was narrowly technocratic and instrumentalist and a “heart” that was full of dreamy sensibility. The quintessentially modern Westerner combines with sophisticated technical ideas and equipment a sentimental imagination. Politicians of this type feel the pain of suffering collectives and dare to share that they care. They also have elaborate plans for reorganizing society. Their goals are idealistic; their method for enacting them is social engineering. Today the typical idealist espouses a special brand of ecologism and has very ambitious plans for cleaning up the planet. This idealism owes much to the Rousseauistic assumption that civilization has ruined a pure and wholesome nature.

Looking back on what has been said here about modern idealism, it might appear incongruous that, like Rousseau, persons can at the same time be intellectually brilliant and have imaginations that people of an earlier worldview would consider naïve and utopian. Yet nothing seems more common in the modern Western world. Many employ high intelligence to argue that their cherished dreams for remaking the world are wholly plausible. As already mentioned, there is something willful about Rousseauistic dreaming. It would appear that among those who seem most to need to be persuaded are the idealists themselves.

Idealism and the Desire for Power

There is an aspect of idealism that may explain much of its appeal but that is poorly understood: its connection to the subject of power. Whatever else dreaming of this kind accomplishes for the dreamer, it seems to satisfy a desire to feel superior to others. The person who envisages a life far above the humdrum, routinized present is by this very act, in his own eyes, lifted far above those who are caught within that present

and who, by definition, lack his fine, elevated sentiments. See how noble and superior I am, the idealist announces to self and others, words being unnecessary. The putatively benevolent dream is, among other things, a form of self-flattery. The one who thinks of self as committed to a better world for others also feels deserving of their praise. He feels entitled, moreover, to directing their lives. The greater the person's imagined caring for mankind, the greater the power to which the person feels entitled to do good for mankind.

Idealism gives sense of moral superiority.

This aspect of the idealistic dream is, it can be argued, no marginal component or hidden implication of the dream. The sense of moral superiority and the corresponding sense of entitlement are parts of what makes the dream what it is and recommends it to the dreamer. It is perhaps the most important source of its allure. To get pleasure from the idealistic dream the person does not have to receive the actual adulation of others or exercise power over them in practice. Short of engaging in politics, the person can experience them in the imagination. He can enjoy them viscerally by identifying with the idealistic political movement or with its virtuous leader whose rhetoric and actions confirm the idealist's moral authority and nobility.

To many admirers of modernity, the twentieth century was the most enlightened in human history. It was an era committed to noble ideals—"equality" and "democracy" prominent among them. Yet in that century far more people died at the hands of other human beings than in any previous century. Some of the biggest idealists, championing a vision of universal brotherhood—Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao—were also among the greatest killers and murderers. They caused enormous suffering. Yet the Western world seems to have learnt very little about idealism from this horrifying experience. Idealists *still* expect, and often receive, admiration for their allegedly noble visions. The *idealism* cannot be blamed for the homicidal mania, idealists tell others. There was nothing wrong with the *ideals*; they are as beautiful as ever. The ruthlessness was the result of practical means somehow getting away from noble ends.

Idealism not blamed for actions done in its name.

But at this stage of the argument being presented it should be possible to see that there is a connection between the impossible dream and ruthlessness. The problem is not with poorly chosen means but with the impossible dream itself. The dream

*The impossible
dream itself
the problem.*

ignores basic facts of life, specifically the need for moral character. The typical idealistic goals fly in the face of reality. They more or less deliberately *hide* aspects of life that are crucial to any realistic assessment of whether change of a particular kind is desirable or even possible. In particular, the ideals conceal the darker side of human nature, letting it be acknowledged at most among opponents of the dream. To the idealist, issues of character seem trivial or beside the point in comparison with the need to end great social evils and realize great plans. As the champion of a noble cause, the idealistic leader does not need to be shackled. More power to him! The idealistic leader himself sees little need to worry about personal weaknesses of his own, such as an inclination to be ruthless in dealing with opposition. To oppose him is, after all, perverse.

How to explain that in many quarters the view that idealists have of themselves is still considered plausible? People who are not as heavily under the sway of idealism nevertheless sense that to attack its leading representatives is to attack a part of themselves. Idealistic assumptions come up against overwhelming philosophical and historical evidence, but so dependent is the self-worth of millions of people on the purported nobility of the dream that they cannot let it be challenged root and branch. Yet neglecting unwelcome but stubborn and salient facts of human life, as idealists do, is not admirable. Contrary to their reputation, the idealistic goals are not noble and beautiful. They are reprehensible and dangerous. The horrors of the twentieth century were not paradoxical or difficult to explain. In important respects, they emanated directly from a self-deluding, self-applauding moralism and a concomitant dearth of moral character. The brutality of the idealists simply brought the neglect of moral self-control into the open, just as it expressed a hatred of the existing world and a disdain for actual human beings that was contained in the ideal from the beginning. Edmund Burke fully expected violence to flow from the Rousseauistic dreams of the Jacobins.

Irving Babbitt calls Rousseau's imagination "idyllic," and so it is, in part. The term "idyllic" takes note of the fact that from Rousseau's imaginary "nature" all disturbing elements have been removed: life in the state of nature is simple, sunny,

and pleasant, a kind of vacation from life as known to history. But the term “idyllic” does not convey the potential for inhumanity that is a basic, if often unrecognized, part of this kind of imagination. Imagination of a reality-defying idealistic kind foreshadows and rather predictably calls forth certain dark practical consequences. These are consonant with the back side of the dream, its disgust with what exists. That disgust is part of what *defines* the dream. The apparent benevolence of the dream may to some extent hide its potential for ruthlessness, hide it even from the dreamer, but it surfaces as soon as the dream is brought into contact with the real world, the world of action, where it is bound to encounter opposition. The true believer’s predictable response when others fail to yield unquestioningly is coercion. You are either for him or against him. The dreamer of the impossible dream sees no reason to tolerate opposition. In its assumption of moral superiority the dream is uncompromising. It demands monopoly. Those who do not acknowledge the moral authority of the idealist have to suffer his wrath. His reaction to opposition is not unlike that of the egotistical child: he throws a temper tantrum. Sooner or later idealism brings conflict, whether domestic or international. As the idealist tries to make uncooperative reality conform to the dream, the violence expands and intensifies. Through unbending zeal the dreamer tries to persuade even himself of the sacred nature of his vision. To show mercy for or to compromise with opponents would cast doubt on the moral nobility and necessity of the dream and would, in effect, denigrate self. To give up the dream is unthinkable, for it is the idealist’s source of personal worth and pride. It alone legitimizes his power.

Dark political consequences consonant with backside of the dream.

To capture idealism’s potential for merciless brutality a term like “diabolical” is needed. The idyllic aspect of the ideals of the French Revolution was “freedom, equality and brotherhood.” Their diabolical aspect, made evident by their practical entailments, was the guillotine.⁶

It should be possible to see that in its pure form the impossible dream expresses and serves, but also veils, unbridled moral conceit. It extends to the dreamer a right to unlimited

⁶ For an in-depth study of the new Jacobinism and how it relates to more traditional American political thought and culture, see Ryn, *America the Virtuous*.

power. It serves as a great *stimulant* and *justification* for self-aggrandizement. It is incompatible with traditional modesty, self-restraint, and limits on power. The gist of what has been argued so far about idealism is, then, not merely that “ideas have consequences,” but that the dream is inherently, from the beginning, consonant with its practical expression.

Idealistic dreaming reveals bad motives.

To sum up on that point, imagining and advocating unattainable goals is from the point of view of traditional morality not admirable, but perverse and dangerous. It distracts human beings from attainable goals and from the need to deal realistically with the chief obstacles to moral well-being, which are in human beings themselves. Idealists who promise a different world are not sweet and well-intentioned. Their dreams reveal bad *motives*. Contrary to their reputation, their souls are not beautiful, but ugly and ignoble. The imagination through which they view the world is wicked and shoddy. Idealists have pulled entire societies into disaster, and they can do so again.

Many people regard the great suffering of the otherwise progressive and enlightened twentieth century as a terrible aberration, perhaps the birth-pangs associated with something glorious coming into being. Surely, mass killings and murder are now a thing of the past. But many people remain greatly susceptible to the lure of political idealism, if not always of the most extreme sort. For example, in the last several decades a powerful political and intellectual movement invested the United States of America with a worldwide mission to spearhead what George W. Bush called a “global democratic revolution.” The French Jacobins of the eighteenth century appointed France as the liberator of mankind. The *new* Jacobins appointed America.

Idealistic myth of America justifies unleashing of power.

It was partly to wean Americans off the traditional fear of unlimited power and the view of life that it implies that the new Jacobins sought to transfer the allegiance of Americans to a *reinvented*, more uninhibited America. They propounded the myth of *America the Virtuous*—the myth of a morally noble America, according to which America should have free rein in transforming the world. The myth provided the moral justification for a great unleashing of power.

Political idealism is no less ravenous for power when ap-

plied to domestic politics. There, too, it assumes a monopoly of moral virtue. It feels entitled to mobilizing and directing great power to reshape society. In America it does not care for a small federal government with checks and balances and does not like to share power with states, counties, and localities, to say nothing of citizens in their private capacities. Whether it considers itself “right” or “left,” the imagination of political idealism thrills to the dream of maximum energy in the executive, of a virtuous president who overpowers opposition.

It might be objected that power seeking does not need some kind of idealism to give it energy. Most people are perfectly cynical in their pursuit of power. However true that may be, the will to power can hardly present itself as a desire to rule others for its own sake, especially not at a time when moral-sounding motives are expected and there is a need to appeal to democratic majorities. Today that desire routinely wraps itself in idealistic rhetoric. For those in our era who desire expansion and concentration of power idealism is the great enabler. It discovers ever-new reasons for government to act benevolently. The greater the caring for others, the greater the need to place power in the hands of those who care.

*Idealism
the great
enabler.*

If the argument of this article has any validity, it is no coincidence that idealistic benevolence always justifies giving more power to the benevolent—never less. So well does the will to dominate dress itself up in moralistic attire that it may at times deceive even the power-seekers themselves.

Idealism vs. Constitutionalism

The old American idea of limited, decentralized government was conceived by people who believed that placing restrictions on self and on government and encouraging strong communities was essential to human well-being. Today, an increasingly common and influential human type espouses grandiose political objectives and correspondingly grandiose moral justifications for a desired expansion of power. The title of a book, *An End to Evil*, written several years ago by two enthusiastic advocates of American global supremacy during the glory days of the New Jacobinism, summed up the moral pur-

pose of the desired reign.⁷ America should get rid of dictators and other evil people. *An end to evil*—could any goal appeal more to the will to power? The task is surely the very essence of moral nobility, and because it is at once enormous and endless it requires power to match.

A wish to “end” evil would have been rejected out of hand by the old Americans. It betrays an unwillingness to face the human condition. Evil can be to some extent contained—that the Framers of the Constitution did believe—but evil is an inescapable part of human life, hence the great need for character and both internal and external limits on power.

The old Western notion of man’s moral and intellectual shortcomings and the accompanying recognition of a need for self-control and humility can be traced back through Christianity to the ancient Greeks. This view of human nature and the political attitudes that it fosters tend to *forestall*, *censure*, and *defuse* an inordinate desire for power. For that reason, it is not pleasing to the ego that wants to dominate other human beings. Idealism has just the opposite effect. It is a potent *stimulant* for the desire for self-aggrandizement. Today idealism is letting a grasping, “imperialistic” ego throw off the old American constitutional personality and related constitutional restraints. It offers powerful support for the transformation of traditional limited, decentralized American government into a national Superstate.

It might be objected that the idealism described in this article is only an “ideal type” in the Weberian sense and that in real life we seldom encounter it in such pure form. In most people it is diluted or balanced by other factors. Also, this idealism is certainly not the only force to have contributed to the expansion and concentration of power. That many seek political power for the wrong reasons also does not mean that government cannot be a beneficial force. Each of these comments is well-grounded, and they are not contradicted by anything that has been argued in this article. It should perhaps be stated explicitly that, needless to say, there are reasons for wanting to expand the role of government that may have

⁷ David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil* (New York: Random House, 2003). As a speechwriter for President George W. Bush Frum coined the phrase “the axis of evil.”

*Idealism a
stimulant for
will to power.*

nothing to do with idealistic dreaming. The point of what has been argued here is not that political idealism, by itself, has caused the transformation of America, although it has exerted great influence. The main purpose has been to draw attention to a major, but poorly understood, factor in the transformation of America (as well as the rest of Western civilization) and to demonstrate the nature of its influence—to show how idealism changes morality and society and the view of power. In order to lay bare the moral-imaginative core of idealism, this article has examined this phenomenon in full flower, as it were, rather than in the practical politics of a particular society where it inevitably blends with or is balanced by other currents.

The effect of idealism in America as elsewhere has been to trivialize and weaken love of neighbor and thus to undermine the support for traditional decentralized political and social structures. At the same time it has helped inspire a vast accumulation and centralization of state power. In proportion as the moral sensibilities of Americans have become idealistic, Americans have come to expect more and more from government and less and less from themselves, their intimate groups, and communities. Not even the idea of the state as parent, which is far advanced in Europe, is without traction in America. To an extent that the Americans described by de Tocqueville would have found hard to fathom, Americans today are willing to rely on a distant central government for their well-being. Idealism has played a key role in undermining the old American distrust of a concentration of power. Wrapping itself in vaguely Christian-sounding rhetoric, idealism has been the Trojan horse for the forces wanting to dismantle traditional American constitutionalism. Most Christian churches, too, have been deeply affected by idealism. To that extent they have gradually abandoned the traditional concern about sin and the need for repentance and adopted a feel-good sentimentalism. As Americans lowered their moral guard, they became increasingly willing to abdicate old responsibilities and local and private autonomy. In practice, if not always in theory, they moved away from the principle of subsidiarity. This has been the case also with many Roman Catholics, whose notion of “social justice” has under the influence of idealism become indistinguishable from that of the centralized and secularized welfare state. Sub-

Idealism weakens supports for decentralized society.

stituting idealism for traditional morality, people were able to persuade themselves that in abdicating personal responsibility they were actually behaving nobly. In fact, the greater their willingness to hand over power to virtuous-sounding leaders and presumed experts, the greater the evidence of having a superior moral sensibility. As government benevolence has replaced traditional morality, people have been freed from sometimes burdensome familial and communal ties and responsibilities and have been spared much inconvenience. Relieved of the need to show character and exercise up-close responsibilities, they can give more attention to their own personal interests and pleasures. Yet by the standard of an *earlier* understanding of man's humanity, their personhood has been greatly diminished.

Traditional morality still buttressing old social and political structures.

Though idealism in one form or another has greatly affected all parts of American society, traditional morality is not extinct. It keeps buttressing some old social and political habits and structures. Americans are not of one mind. There is not yet any consensus in favor of the comprehensive, benevolent state. Opposition to it is stronger in America than in Europe. Still, the central power that idealism has done so much to boost is so far-reaching that it would have horrified an earlier type of American. So deeply attracted have Americans become to the idea that a distant central government can be their benign guardian that many of them barely notice or care that the sphere of private, local, and autonomous action is contracting precipitously. In recent decades the centralization and expansion of government has been greatly aided by benevolent-sounding arguments for protecting the American people against threats to its security, specifically terrorism. Already predisposed by idealism to regard federal power as a benign force, Americans have, more or less, invited the creation of an elaborate, massive national security apparatus that employs nothing less than totalitarian methods of surveillance.

Rousseau gave the West the image of the wonderfully natural child, uninfected by civilization. To be natural, men should be more like children. He did not want to consider the evidence that children are *at least* as prone to egotism and cruelty as adults. In partly unrecognized cooperation with rationalists, Rousseauistic idealists have had much success in over-

turning the ancient civilization of the West, but they have not rid society of egotism, greed, or the will to power. They have only managed greatly to weaken the old moral, intellectual, cultural, and political restraints placed upon them. They have produced, in abundance, immature, ill-behaved, ignorant, erratic egotists. Rationalist modernity has simultaneously placed sophisticated technology, including military and surveillance equipment, at their disposal.

Many defenders of the old American Constitution seem to think that all that would be needed in order to save the Constitution would be to persuade Americans of the correct interpretation of the framers' intent. These "constitutionalists" live in a world of abstractions, a dreamworld of their own. The argument here advanced should have demonstrated that there is only one way to revive American constitutionalism, and that is for Americans, from leaders to people in general, to revive or freshly create something like the older type of morality and to start *living* very differently. Should that not be a likely development, the future of American constitutionalism is bleak.