

Freedom Rediscovered? Liberty in Conditions of Modernity

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This paper critiques the post-liberal attempt to revive the classical conception of freedom — defined as the virtuous exercise of self-governance toward an objective common good — within the context of the modern world. The author argues that post-liberals like Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule fundamentally misidentify their target by attributing the eclipse of this classical tradition to liberalism alone, rather than to the broader conditions of modernity.

A central pillar of the critique is the historical role of Christianity in dismantling the Aristotelian metaphysics that once underpinned the classical view. Drawing on the work of Charles Taylor and Michael Gillespie, the paper highlights how the rise of nominalism and theological shifts toward recognising God's absolute sovereignty stripped nature of its intrinsic *telos*. This internal Christian revolution paved the way for the mechanistic, modern scientific worldview, rendering the classical link between freedom and natural ends untenable long before liberalism's dominance.

The paper further argues that post-liberals suffer from 'Saint-Just's Illusion', failing to recognise that the social and economic preconditions of ancient liberty — such as small-scale city-states and the absence of modern commerce — are incompatible with the scale and diversity of the modern nation-state. Consequently, the paper identifies a fatal incoherence: post-liberals attempt to utilize modern instruments, such as the administrative state and bureaucracy, to enforce a pre-modern moral order that those very instruments helped to displace. The paper concludes that unless post-liberals embrace a radical, anti-modern theological project — similar to Radical Orthodoxy (which underpins alternative post-liberalisms of e.g. Jonathan Milbank and Adrian Pabst) — their political program remains a muddle that underestimates the coercion required to impose a worldview at odds with the modern understanding of the universe.