

— LETTERS  
on LIBERTY



LIBERTY IN A  
NARCISSISTIC AGE

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Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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## *What are Letters on Liberty?*

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

*Academy of Ideas team*



## LIBERTY IN A NARCISSISTIC AGE

In recent years, our civilization has come to accept a creeping paternalism. Undesired speech is routinely denounced as ‘dangerous’. Various schemes have been launched to protect society from this menacing language: researchers are kept on a tight leash, forced to spend nearly as much time asking permission to do their job as actually doing it; employers monitor their employees’ every move, not trusting them to make even minor judgement calls; education all too often requires endless criticising rather than critical thinking; and literature has become little more than an exercise in vapid self-indulgence, the language as over-simplified<sup>i</sup> as the content is juvenile.

Unsurprisingly, this infantilisation has wriggled its way into politics, too. Citizens are no longer expected to resolve issues among themselves, but are told to appeal to ‘experts’ to decide for them instead. In some quarters, people are even said to be incapable of acting in their own best interests, that democracy is ‘too important’ to be left to them. Far better to exclude the incompetent masses in favour of meticulously selected and carefully guided stakeholders.<sup>ii</sup>

However, encouraging people to live as minor wards of the state, implicitly trusting their mental and moral

superiors, has failed to instil any level of accountability in them. Helplessness, once imposed, quickly becomes internalised.

Since freedom and self-reliance are off the agenda, bread and games must be provided instead. Debt-bondage-creating buy-now-pay-later schemes are celebrated as innovations,<sup>iii</sup> high-powered careers are meant to go hand-in-hand with byzantine 'self-care' regimens, and any suggestion that dilettantism isn't a job qualification is likely to be met with unadulterated rage, the leitmotif of the present age. While there is a clamour to be involved in decision-making, there is rarely a desire to be held accountable for those decisions or a willingness to be bound by that which doesn't entirely comport with one's personal wishes. Indeed, practically everything (the environment, women's rights, feeling happy) is said to be 'more important' than democracy - which is to say, more important than other people.

These symptoms have become worryingly commonplace in recent years and their self-contradictory nature - demanding both to be insulated from responsibility and unquestioningly obeyed - has confounded many observers. There is, however, an explanation that lies not in logic, but in madness, for these symptoms bear more than a passing resemblance to that most infantile mental affliction -

narcissism. It is this societally accepted narcissism, flowering from a font of learned helplessness, that underlies the current ‘crisis of democracy’, and holds the key to its resolution.

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## **Infantilising democracy**

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The term narcissism is often colloquially used to indicate mere vanity, an image summed up by the mythical Narcissus staring endlessly at his own captivating reflection. But while narcissists do require constant admiration, this is the comparatively sunny side of their condition.

In the safety of their own minds, narcissists nurture a self-image populated by grandiose fantasies, and they maintain these fantasies by ignoring reality to the greatest extent possible. In other words, they almost intentionally insist on living within an illusion that revolves entirely around themselves, mini-Sun Kings declaring *‘l’etat, c’est moi’*.

While full-blown narcissistic personality disorder is comparatively rare, researchers have noted that narcissistic behaviour patterns, such as the propensity to view oneself as uniquely special and particularly

deserving, are on the rise.<sup>iv</sup> Even people who are not clinical narcissists are imitating narcissistic behaviour.

This is a problem for democracy, not just because narcissists are, at bottom, more than a little insane, but because their particular brand of insanity deeply conflicts with concepts like equality, liberty and independence. For these reasons, when narcissistic behaviour becomes widespread, two things rapidly deteriorate: the social contract (which underpins democracy) and the connection between cause and effect (which underpins the Enlightenment).

According to Jean Jacques Rousseau, who coined the term 'social contract', a free and equal society requires that:

*'The citizen gives his consent to all the laws, including those which are passed in spite of his opposition, and even those which punish him when he dares to break any of them.'*<sup>v</sup>

Only the complete submission of each individual to this association of equals would ensure that no one had an 'interest in making' rules and laws 'burdensome to others' as the same rules would apply to themselves.

As obvious as that reasoning may seem, it is just as self-understood to narcissists that their personal goals

are simply too important for the normal rules to apply. They, after all, are special. Thus, even in a society that pays a tremendous amount of lip-service to the ideals of democracy, it is not unusual to witness members of the rising narcissistic class refusing to be bound by egalitarian decision-making. If pressed, they will think of an amazing number of reasons for why this should be so.

*The democratic process is viewed as expendable in service to the higher goal that the narcissist has fixed upon.*

One recent and rather innovative tactic is for individuals to claim that their politics is not something that they are exercising for themselves (perish the thought), but rather on behalf of their non-voting children or even their far-future descendants, with whom they stand in miraculous communion.<sup>vi</sup> The unborn are rather conveniently unable to disagree with the blessed ancestor, who by these means effectively prints themselves a licence to over-ride their living equals in the name of their magical clairvoyance.

Others may see 'the market' (their own wealth), economic development, or environmental policies as the thing that is simply 'too important' for them to compromise on. As the environmentalist James

Lovelock put it, democracy (dealing with other people) is an obstruction to action, and it ‘may be necessary to put it on hold for a while’.<sup>vii</sup> Regardless of preferences, the common denominator is that the democratic process is viewed as expendable in service to the higher goal that the narcissist has fixed upon.

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## **Judge, jury and executioner**

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For much the same reasons, narcissists don’t convince others of the merits of their views (this would imply that there are other equals out there). Instead, they ‘educate’ them about why the narcissist’s opinion is objectively right. Debate is replaced with an endless jockeying for position to determine who is ‘more equal’. Rather than an intrinsic right to be relied upon, equality becomes a moving target. As a result, one of the few actual conditions of democracy is obliterated, a casualty to the narcissistic class’s belief that the importance of their convictions entitles them to override others. Should that fail to happen, and should the narcissists’ preferred programme thus fail to materialise, they have a way to deal with that, too. They simply unleash ‘narcissistic rage’:<sup>viii</sup> an unreasonable and disproportionate anger meant to wipe the intruding thought from the face of the earth -

a kind of built-in enforcement mechanism to intimidate others and perpetuate the madness.

Rousseau encouraged citizens to formulate their political opinions on an entirely self-reliant basis, declaring: 'It is... essential... that each citizen should think only his own thoughts.'<sup>ix</sup> Such thoughts, however, inevitably often clash with narcissistic fantasies. When they do, narcissistic rage demands that they be 'cancelled' and retracted. While it seems incomprehensible to the uninitiated, there is method to this madness; what an 'average' person might find merely irritating (foolish theorising on the earth's shape, for example), the narcissist perceives as an intolerable threat to their own world-view. Their grasp on reality rests on such shaky foundations that it is easily endangered.

*The narcissist's approval depends on how much their victim's behaviour complies with the narcissist's own volatile internal fantasies - this game is both high-stakes and unpredictable.*

Even worse are those who act on independent thoughts. Engineering entrepreneur Elon Musk has become a particular target of narcissistic wrath in recent times, not only for his impertinent attempts to

revolutionise space travel sans royal approval, but because he has largely chosen to ignore the narcissistic class. As one journalist put it, among his many other crimes, Musk had the temerity not to hire a team of lobbyists and PR firms to convince the media to like him.<sup>x</sup>

Narcissists excel at setting themselves up as judge, jury and executioner, using their narcissistic rage to punish those who displease them. Because the narcissist's approval depends on how much their victim's behaviour complies with the narcissist's own volatile internal fantasies, this game is both high-stakes and unpredictable. Victims wear themselves out attempting to fulfil this impossible challenge and all too often come to accept learned helplessness under the tutelage of (equally infantile) narcissists. Abandoning their own convictions, self-belief and rights to equality and freedom, they become subsumed to the narcissistic complex.

One *Guardian* writer captured this dynamic perfectly - if unwittingly - while detailing her guilt about wanting to consume dairy products. In her *mea culpa*, she refers to regular cow's milk as 'Bad Milk'<sup>xi</sup> before declaring her anxiety 'to minimise my part in transforming it [the world] into a flaming wasteland'. But nothing she does ever seems like enough. She even rather desperately jokes that perhaps she should divorce her

dairy-committed husband, before concluding exactly what the narcissist class has been waiting for:

*‘Every choice is bad; I am constantly balancing one harm against another. As in so much of life, I just want someone authoritative to tell me what to do.’*

Now, a narcissist would never be so crude as to tell you what to do - that would spoil things. You need to guess what they want and act like you coincidentally want it, too. But a willingness to suspend one’s own judgement and accept the narcissist’s authority as the sun around which one’s little planet should revolve is a good start.

Indeed, the ability to judge other’s ‘goodness’ in the most black-and-white, wholesale terms is a narcissist’s dream, and the upper bourgeois (‘the clerisy’ as Joel Kotkin dubbed them) have fallen for it hook, line and sinker. They comprise the bulk of the narcissistic class, often revolving between victim and perpetrator with astonishing rapidity. In their constant quest to both judge and be judged worthy they have invented: ‘The Good Lobby’<sup>xiii</sup>; ‘The Good Information Project’<sup>xiii</sup>; ‘The Good Ancestor’<sup>xiv</sup>; newspaper articles asking children to speculate on whether they are good;<sup>xv</sup> and even a clothing brand called ‘Be a Good Person’<sup>xvi</sup> dedicated to manufacturing items that say ‘be a good

person?. One must ask, good compared to whom? Jesus? Mother Teresa? Bob Geldof?

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## Shifting goalposts

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But narcissists cannot set such clear sign-posts, because the yardstick of 'goodness' no longer resides in unalterable codices written at the behest of higher beings - it's in their own heads. (For all its faults, organised Christianity at least had the decency to assert that its central figure 'Jesus Christ' was 'the same yesterday, today and forever'.)

A recent article illustrates this inside/outside confusion. Its headline reads: 'You can finally ask Facebook's oversight board to remove *bad* posts',<sup>xvii</sup> before the article continues on to speak of having '*offending* Facebook posts removed'. 'Offending' (perception/subjective) and 'bad' (absolute/objective) are indistinguishable in this world, where 'good' are things that don't threaten the intensely fragile narcissist and 'bad' are things that do. Narcissists - and this is a crucial point - are by their nature and of necessity unstable authoritarians because their worldview is too fragile to withstand collision with reality.

This response - to demand child-like protections against reality - only serves to infantilise the population, thus intensifying the narcissism that drove it in the first place. Narcissists demand infantilisation, and infantilising people makes them act like narcissists.

*Totalitarians disconnect from reality, proceeding to annihilate whatever contradicts their illusions. Today's narcissists share this fateful impulse.*

This is the force driving the push towards authoritarianism. It's not a conviction - it's the self-preservation strategy of an infantilised population. As a result of these widespread delusions, not only does the social contract and independent thinking suffer, the very relationship between cause and effect deteriorates as well. Whatever worries one might have about the return of racial categories, it is this specific aspect of our present era - the fracturing of reality and the rupturing of cause and effect - that reminds us so eerily of totalitarian societies.

Totalitarians disconnect from reality, proceeding to annihilate whatever contradicts their illusions. Today's narcissists share wholeheartedly this fateful impulse.

In fact, we have even witnessed a few uncanny - if mild - examples of this phenomenon. The most notable was likely the many suburban Americans who insisted that they be recognized as 'resistance' fighters standing up to 'fascist dictator' Donald Trump while they continued to work unmolested in white collar jobs, and consistently failed to exhibit any of the outward signs that traditionally accompany resistance to fascist dictators (such as being arrested, censored or compelled to seek asylum in Switzerland). Questioning this fantasy tended to (predictably) result in narcissistic rage, insulating them from the need to bring internal perception and external reality, cause and effect, into alignment.

Ironically, nothing leads to such danger of authoritarianism (Trumpian or otherwise) as narcissistic imitation does. When narcissists hold sway they will scour the world, erasing every person or object that dares to deviate from their wishes, only to be confronted with their own countenance reflected back at them from a million empty vessels.

Indeed, they will hardly be able to help doing so. In order to maintain their own 'specialness', narcissists must trample on the intrinsic human dignity of others; in order to maintain their fragile, yet inflated, egos, they must extinguish other people's self-belief. They are more than happy to 'rule a void' as Peter Mair so

aptly put it, having crushed all possibility of dissent. Narcissists cannot build - the risk of an illusion-shattering failure is simply too great. They can only destroy.

But while clinical narcissists may not be treatable, their imitators - infinitely more numerous - are an artificial product and can, fortunately, be dragged back into reality.

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## The freedom to make mistakes

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Immanuel Kant described Enlightenment as:

*‘The exit of man from his self-inflicted immaturity... immaturity is the inability to use one’s mind without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-inflicted if the cause of it is not the lack of understanding, but a lack of resolution and courage to use it without guidance from someone else... “have the courage to use your own understanding!” is the motto of the Enlightenment.’<sup>xviii</sup>*

Insulating people from the consequences of their actions - infantilising them - is a kind of sensory deprivation. With only their own mental hall of mirrors to rely on, deprived of any external feedback, many people inevitably start to behave like narcissists.

Our knee-jerk reaction thus far has been to lean-in to infantilisation, to disempower the obviously incompetent still further and appease narcissistic rage (which, after all, no one wants directed at them). Rather than having the courage to use our own understanding, we allow ourselves to be intimidated into compliance. But we must do the opposite.

We must un-infantilise our society, reintroduce accountability into everyday life and feel the real consequences of our actions. The disinterested may flunk university; the McMansion spendthrifts can face bankruptcy; the easily offended can have their little meltdowns. We can only truly experience liberty by embracing its downsides - accepting that in a state of equals we may not always get our way, but that we do have a right to think our own thoughts and contribute to the formation of the general will.

Equally, we must re-entrust people with their own fate - adult university students, for example, need not be hounded to attend lectures, and neither do employees and researchers require 24/7 monitoring. Berating (or bemoaning) narcissistic behaviour will not help - it doesn't provide the narcissistic imitator any path out of their own hellish maze, and it won't save democracy from creeping authoritarianism. This problem was created by actions and can only be solved the same way.

One may, in this brave adult world, choose one's own milk without triggering an apocalypse, or even make a decision that a far descendant will sneer at as benighted ignorance. Some mistakes will be made, but this can only happen through a genuine interaction with reality that provides feedback on the actual mistake rather than mere fear about it. After all, Thomas Edison only figured out how to make lightbulbs via thousands of failures.

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