



October 2019

Dear listener,

In Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a giant supercomputer called Deep Thought is built by a team of extraterrestrial beings to come up with the answer to the "Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything." After 7-1/2 million years of computation, the answer is finally revealed: "42." Only then does it become evident that the *answer* is unintelligible without knowledge of what the *question* is.

Behind Adams's clever fantasy lurks an agnosticism that suggests that *all* deep thought about ultimate questions or answers is doomed to be fruitless, if not dangerously self-deceiving. But in spite of its latent skepticism, the saga behind "42" serves to remind us that *good answers require good questions*. For an answer to have constructive consequences, the question that evoked it must be well formed and well informed.

Similarly, a prescription for medication or a therapeutic procedure can only heal a sick patient if the prior diagnosis is true to the nature of the ailment being treated. The most thorough medical treatment imaginable does no good if the causes for a physical disorder are misunderstood. *Good treatments require good diagnoses*.

This principle applies to the challenge of living faithfully in the midst of social and cultural confusion. If we recognize the *fact* of some social sickness or malignancy, but misdiagnose its *causes*, efforts to respond wisely may well be misdirected; they may even unwittingly reinforce the conditions that gave rise to the problem in the first place.

Efforts at cultural diagnosis are hampered if they are pursued from within the same framework of fundamental assumptions that brought into being the disorders they hope to cure. Alert Christians may rightly perceive a pattern of social practices and beliefs in need of remedy or reform, but — as children of the same cultural setting that birthed the disordered condition — they often share with their rivals a number of presuppositions about "Life, the Universe, and Everything." Presuppositions by their nature are typically held unconsciously and mistakenly regarded as "common sense," so they are often not scrutinized. Shared "mental DNA" often creates diagnostic blind spots, which can easily result in strategies that unwittingly bolster the foundational beliefs that gave rise to the problem in the first place.

Consider the diagnostic project suggested in the title of Patrick Deneen's recent book: *Why Liberalism Failed*. Deneen is one of many thinkers who have recognized the practical urgency of answering this question; hence the flurry of books with the word "post-liberal" in the title or subtitle. But it's very hard to imagine a post-liberal future *from within* a conceptual framework that has been significantly formed by the assumptions of liberalism. Hence suggested treatments for the ailments caused by liberalism are often tainted with the very elements that they aim to cure. This leads Michael Hanby to observe — with reference to the challenges posed to religious liberty by liberalism's totalizing tendency — that "the greatest threat to religious freedom

therefore comes not from the liberal state, but from the failure of Christians to see beyond the confines of the liberal imagination.” The consequences of such failure are likely to be severe. As philosopher D. C. Schindler recently remarked in his Areopagus Lecture, “modern liberalism is something like a superbug that strengthens its pathologies in response to inadequate treatment.”

For Christians, thinking “beyond the confines of the liberal imagination” should mean thinking in a more deeply theological register. Assessing the causes of the failures of liberalism requires a willingness to think about public life in theological terms, an approach that liberalism discourages. The failures of liberalism are in large measure a function of its insistence on defining public life as *secular* life, and interpreting secular to mean “intelligible without any theological truth claims.”

Twenty years ago, in his magisterial book of political theology *The Desire of the Nations*, moral philosopher Oliver O’Donovan observed that the West’s project of constructing political life on “an avowedly anti-sacred basis” had reached an impasse. Citizens don’t trust those who wield political power (from presidents to policemen), and it’s not just because they are perceived as crooks, liars, or racists. It’s because the very idea of political authority has become, in O’Donovan’s word, *unbelievable*. “Binding political loyalties and obligations seem to be deprived of any point. The doctrine that we set up political authority, as a device to secure our own essentially private, local and unpolitical purposes, has left the Western democracies in a state of pervasive moral debilitation, which, from time to time, inevitably throws up idolatrous and authoritarian reactions.”

This precarious state won’t be repaired with appeals to civility, the common good, or the wisdom of the Founders, as long as such appeals adhere to the conventional limits of modern thought, which bracket off the transcendent. The growing civic friction we witness — racial tensions, violence by and against law enforcement officials, venomous public speech, battles over the meaning of the human body — requires a critical mass of citizens and neighbors whose thinking is not hemmed in by those secularizing limits.

That’s one of the strongest reasons I can offer you to consider purchasing gift subscriptions to the MARS HILL AUDIO *Journal*.

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Gratefully,



Ken Myers
Host and Producer

P. S. If you haven’t yet listened to D. C. Schindler’s Areopagus Lecture mentioned above — “For Freedom Set Free”: Retrieving Genuine Religious Liberty” — it’s available to stream from our website or as a purchased download from our catalog pages.

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