

Two Creation Stories

The Human Person and the American Idea

By David Blankenhorn

Who are we? How did we come to be? For the modern person of Western civilization at the end of this century, there are only two creation stories. One takes place in the Garden of Eden, as told in the Book of Genesis. The other takes place in the State of Nature, as told by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and the other eighteenth-century philosophers of the Enlightenment and creators of Anglo-American liberalism.¹

In one story, humans are God's children, created in God's likeness and image, and called by God into special relationships with one another and into a covenant with God. In this accounting of who we are, humans are free to seek and understand the truth about themselves, and even free to reject the truth, but they are not free – here I believe is the meaning of the forbidden fruit – to decide for themselves what is good and what is evil, since the power to make the moral law is God's alone.

In the other story, humans leave the State of Nature (where life is cruel and short) and contract with one another to create civilization. They do so because they choose to do so and because it is in their interest to do so. In this accounting, there is no natural human teleology and there is no forbidden fruit.

In one story, some ideas and practices are “naturally” wrong, unsuited to who we are. (Two examples drawn from today's headlines: human cloning and the selling of human eggs.) In the other story, simply to ask the basic question – “Why not?” – is to know that the eventual answer will be: “Yes, let's do it. We can eat of that tree.”

¹ Roger Shattuck makes roughly the same assertion somewhat less elliptically: “In the long perspective of four thousand years, the Western world has discovered or invented only two master plots, two narratives of high explanatory power. They affect every aspect of human life today. The amalgam of the Greco-Roman heritage with Jewish and Christian traditions produced a culture in which the naked rule of status and power began to yield to justice under law, the dignity of all persons under God, and a morality of altruism. The sequence of Hebrew covenants followed by the New Testament Redemption story offered an account of things bestowed on us from on high by a single God. That religious ethos, though reformed and attacked for the last five centuries, had no full-fledged competitor until the elaboration of Darwinian evolution in the middle of the nineteenth century. Renaissance secular humanism and Enlightenment reason opened the way for evolutionary theory without themselves establishing a complete and competing account of things. The new story of life emerging uncreated out of the primal slime and finding its upward way by natural elimination (misleadingly called ‘natural selection’) has partially displaced the old story without destroying its teachings and ideals. Since the Renaissance and Enlightenment, many citizens of the West have composed or compartmentalized themselves in such a way as to accommodate both stories.” See Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 302.

In one story, the world is consciously, intelligently created. In the other, the emergence of the world is random or at least inexplicable, lacking a conscious or overarching purpose.

One story posits natural law, through which humans can participate in divine or eternal law. The other story shifts the central focus to natural rights, understood primarily as freedom from external restraint. As Michael Ignatieff puts it: “Modernity’s core value is freedom, especially the freedom to fashion one’s identity and one’s life as one will.”²

One story’s understanding of the human person seeks to integrate nature, reason, and revelation. In the other story, reason emerges as dominant, overpowering nature and eventually evicting revelation from much of culture.

In one story, humans are individuals, ordained toward individuation and autonomy. In the other story, humans are also persons, ordained toward connectedness with others and with God, anthropologically hard-wired as beings who thirst for transcendence, understood finally as knowledge of God.

In one story, then, the hero is the individual. The chief virtue is self-expression. The plot centers primarily on assertion and separation, breaking free from the conventions of the Salon, the limits imposed by the old ways, an unhappy marriage. In the other story, the hero is the person. The chief virtue is charity, or love of others and of God. The plot centers largely on submission and communion. In this sense, one story might be understood as more classically masculine, the other as more classically feminine.

In one story, the great temptation, the forbidden fruit, is the prideful belief that humans by themselves “can be as gods, knowing good and evil.” In the other story, temptation is transformed into premise, as humans come to be regarded as what John Rawls calls “self-originating sources of valid claims,”³ with each sovereign person thus separately and properly called to “knowing good and evil.”

² Michael Ignatieff, “Belonging in the Past,” *Prospect* (November 1996), 22.

³ John Rawls, “Kantian Constructivism Moral Theory,” *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (September 1980), 543. In this essay, Rawls makes clear that his argument is based in large measure on “a certain conception of the person,” which in turn requires us to embrace a new way of searching for moral truth that “replaces the search for moral truth interpreted as fixed by a prior and independent order of objects and relations, whether natural or divine, an order apart and distinct from how we conceive ourselves.” Indeed, this particular conception of the person necessitates an equally particular “procedure of constructing the principles of justice,” a philosophical procedure to which Rawls is professionally devoted and apart from which, we are bluntly informed, “there are no moral facts” (p. 518-19).

Well, that is one way to look at it: Apart from a philosophy of reason rooted in a conception of the person as radically unencumbered and auto-teleological, “there are no moral facts.” Another, considerably more humble way to look at it, beautifully explored by Jean Bethke Elshtain in her reflections on Augustine, warns us of “the noetic effects of sin” and therefore “the pridefulness of philosophy.” Listen especially to Elshtain, following Augustine, on “the distorted love of reason”: “Christians need not make promises of the scientific proof for every point of doctrine, for the Christian understands that we are too weak to discover all the truth by reason alone. We need the authority of sacred books; we need a community of interlocutors; we require a dialogue with ourselves and our buffeted hearts; we need the practices and saving presences of a community.” See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), xii, 14, 49, 52.

The best movie I've seen in a long time, *The English Patient*, is centrally concerned with the final incompatibility of the two creation stories. Early on, the protagonist makes clear which story he believes in: "There is no God." He disdains conventionality and flees the restrictions of society, finding his work in the desert, where he can be on his own, living by his own code. He and his friend's wife become lovers. When her life is in danger, returning to her is literally "all that matters." He will do whatever is necessary, including selling maps to the German generals with whom his nation is at war. In the end, she dies anyway and he is horribly burned when a plane that he is flying over the desert, carrying her dead body, goes down in flames. The English patient thus reminds us of Icarus, who gets burned by flying too close to the sun, or, put more plainly, by trying to do the main thing that a person is not meant to do: decide for and by himself what is good.

I realize that I am telling the two stories simplistically. I am overly polarizing them, clearly neglecting, for example, the degree to which the State of Nature story adds to and complicates, rather than simply contests, the Garden of Eden story. I am even ignoring the fact that the creation story of the United States – the story told in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – draws deeply and creatively from both the Garden of Eden and the Enlightenment.

But the essential distinction remains, as does the main historical trend. At least in the West, the human person whom God sent from the Garden of Eden is now increasingly believed instead to be a person who emerged on his own from the State of Nature – a person who today seems destined, ontogenetically and phylogenetically, to approximate ever more closely what Gerald V. Bradley calls "the unencumbered, anterior-to-all-commitments (religious or otherwise), about-to-realize-her-humanity-not-by-choosing-wisely-but-simply-by-choosing 'person.'"⁴

Especially in North America. And most especially in the United States. For if freedom, understood essentially as immunity from restraint, is the main striving of the human person coming out of the State of Nature, freedom is also the main American idea, the founding hypothesis of the American experiment. In so many ways, the story of the United States is the story of a "sweet land of liberty."

"Freedom is perhaps the most resonant, deeply held American value. In some ways, it defines the good in both personal and political life," according to Robert Bellah and his colleagues.⁵ The political scientist Gottfried Dietze concurs: "The drive for freedom has been so strong that it seems to be the destiny of American democracy."⁶ Even the ideal

⁴ Gerald V. Bradley, "Shall We Ratify the New Constitution? The Judicial Manifesto in *Casey* and *Lee*," in Terry Eastland, ed., *Benchmarks: Great Constitutional Controversies in the Supreme Court* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Erdmans, 1995), 123.

⁵ Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 23.

⁶ Gottfried Dietze, *American Democracy: Aspects of Practical Liberalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1.

of equality, that other master value of American culture, is frequently construed as what many observers have termed “equality of liberty.”⁷

Moreover, freedom in North America has a limited, precise meaning, which in turn is rooted in a specific conception of the person. Surveying the origins and content of core American values, Everett C. Ladd describes “a uniquely insistent and far-reaching individualism – a view of the individual person which gives unprecedented weight to his or her choices, interests, and claims.” Ladd concludes: “The American idea of freedom is of the ‘leave me alone’ variety.”⁸

Bellah and his colleagues agree that freedom for most Americans “turns out to mean being left alone by others, not having other people’s values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life.”⁹ Similarly, for Dietze, the United States is the world’s leading exemplar of “pure liberalism,” a cultural ethos through which, over time, “limited freedom” is increasingly displaced by “unlimited freedom.” This is a pure liberalism, then, “of which democracy and equality are mere aspects and which, for better or worse, has tended toward an ever greater purity and its concomitant value-freeness.”¹⁰

This “pure” conception of freedom is ubiquitous in U.S. popular culture. Perhaps its most crystalline expression is in contemporary advertising, arguably our most widely shared cultural grammar. Turn on the television today and you will see any number of advertisements philosophically identical to the recent car ad from El Dorado, with the slogan of “Live Without Limits,” set to the song, “Unchain My Heart,” or to the recent car ad from Toyota, with the slogan of “Make Your Own Rules.”

Making the case for same-sex marriage in *Harper’s Magazine*, Fenton Johnson draws powerfully on core American values. Same-sex marriage, Fenton argues, is properly understood as “the logical culmination of the American democratic experiment, which provides its citizens with an open playing field on which each of us has a responsibility to define and then respect his or her boundaries and rules.” Although some people still “fare better within a package of predetermined rules and boundaries,” growing numbers do not. And these growing numbers reflect the restless essence of the American idea: “for the questioning mind and heart, the debate surrounding marriage is only the latest intrusion of ambiguity into the artificially ordered world of Western thinking.”¹¹

This way of construing freedom in America is not new. Listen to Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road”:

⁷ John Harmon McElroy, *Finding Freedom: America’s Distinctive Cultural Formation* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 153. See also James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, vol. II (New York: Commonwealth Publishing, 1908), 692.

⁸ Everett C. Ladd, “The American Ideology: An Exploration and a Survey of the Origins, Meaning, and Role of American Values” (Washington, D.C.: The American Enterprise Institute, March 1992), 2, 9.

⁹ Bellah, et al., 23. See also Ladd, “Thinking About America,” *The Public Perspective* 4, no. 5 (July/August 1993), 19-26.

¹⁰ Dietze, 9.

¹¹ Fenton Johnson, “Wedded to an Illusion,” *Harper’s Magazine* (November 1996), 43-50.

*From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master total and absolute.*¹²

Perhaps his nation's best poet of democracy, Whitman also explicitly rejects the human person of the Garden of Eden story, urging us instead to "Be not curious about God, For I who am curious about each am not curious about God." And:

*Whimpering and truckling fold with powders for invalids, conformity goes to the fourth-remov'd,
I wear my hat as I please indoors or out.
Why should I pray? why should I venerate and be ceremonious?
Having pried through the strata, analyzed to a hair, counsel'd with doctors and
calculated close,
I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.*¹³

More than two centuries ago, Crèvecoeur famously asked, "What then is the American, this new man?" Much of the answer, coming from many of our most admired observers, has been that the American is nothing less than the new Adam, emerging from perfect Edenic freedom onto American soil, the proper home of a radically new personality. A half-century ago, the literary critic R.W.B. Lewis could describe the American Eden as "the area of total possibility," with its new "Adamic hero" as the "individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources."¹⁴ A few years later, Max Lerner, playing on the name his newborn son, Adam, celebrates "the only fabulous country": "And so enter, Adam, into the only fabulous country where everything is possible and no dreams are excluded. Enter into a world which is shut off from Eden by a flaming sword, where you will endure your own hells and fashion your own Paradise."¹⁵

Much of this prevailing cultural ethos, supporting and reflecting the American Adam, stems ultimately from what the political philosopher William Galston calls "regime effects": the continuing and constantly expanding effects on society of its founding principle. Although any notion of "pure" liberalism ("unlimited freedom") would have been abhorrent and even unrecognizable to the American founders, the American Revolution was clearly, as Lincoln was to put it, "conceived in liberty," aimed almost continuously toward "a new birth of freedom." As Thomas S. Engeman recently put it, "liberal natural right was the chief end sought in the Revolution of 1776."¹⁶ This "chief end" has powerfully endowed U.S. culture with its primary logic: the continual injection,

¹² Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 138

¹³ Whitman, "Song of Myself," *ibid.*, 94, 64.

¹⁴ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 91, 5.

¹⁵ Max Lerner, *The Unfinished Country* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1959), 10.

¹⁶ Thomas S. Engeman, book review (*Locke in America*), *The Review of Politics* 58 (Spring 1996), 382.

eventually into all spheres of culture and into all relationships and social institutions, of the principle of personal omnipotentiality, “the area of total possibility.”

Nowhere are these regime effects clearer than in U.S. family trends. In this regard, it has always made sense to me that our nation’s founding document is a divorce document. It is a declaration of independence: a list of reasons why people may justifiably dissolve the bonds that have connected them to others. As one family scholar put it in 1987, it seems likely that “the traditional family was undermined with the founding of this country on the principle of enlightened self-interest.” (Not that this scholar is worried. Indeed, in order to keep things moving in the right direction, she cheerfully recommends that “in all honesty, we should just take ‘for worse’ out of the marriage ceremony.” Moreover, her recommendation has been widely adopted today, even in religious weddings.)¹⁷

With great insight, Tocqueville in the 1830s extensively shows how, in America, “changes which take place in family relations, are closely connected with the social and political revolution [of the American founding]. There are certain great social principles, which a people either introduces everywhere, or tolerates nowhere.”¹⁸

Commenting in the 1940s on what many observers, including Tocqueville, had long recognized as the comparative weakness of fatherhood in America, one textbook clearly describes U.S. regime effects: “All this lack of strong authoritarianism in American families accords well with the values that are chiefly sought after in the country. No strong father image is compatible with our politics or our economics. We seek the opportunity to prove that we are as good as the next person, and we do not find comfort in following an authoritarian voice – in the state or in the home, from the landowner or the priest – which will issue a command from on high.”¹⁹ Geoffrey Gorer, also writing about the U.S. in the middle of the 20th century, puts it more briefly: “The commonest way of referring to one’s father is ‘my old man.’ America belongs to the young.”²⁰

It makes sense, in this regard, that the great novel of the U.S. is *Huckleberry Finn*. Effectively fatherless, with the runaway slave Jim his only motherly influence, Huck embodies so much of the larger American narrative: running away from the abusive Pap as well as from women who want to “sivilize” him, lighting out for the territory, Huck is ready to encounter life as a grown-up, good-hearted, untamed adolescent. Another Huck Finn story from the 1950s, Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*, a celebration of hipsters who light out for new places in search of American freedom, is again a story of fathers not found and of discovering identity through separation. The novel’s first sentence is: “I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up.”

¹⁷ Pepper Schwartz, “The Family as a Changed Institution,” *Journal of Family Issues* 8, no. 4 (December 1987), 456.

¹⁸ Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 230-231.

¹⁹ Ruth Benedict, “The Family: Genus Americanus,” in Ruth Nanda Anshen, ed., *The Family: Its Function and Destiny* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 165.

²⁰ Geoffrey Gorer, *The American People: A Study in National Character* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1964), 47.

So much of “the American, this new man” is admirable. So much is noble. He has achieved great things. Even when he is a rogue or is weak, for most of us he is impossible not to love, precisely because he tells us so much of how we came to be and who we are.

And yet in North America at the close of this century, no task is more necessary than questioning the viability of the human person as emergent from the State of Nature and, to some large degree, recovering for the next century the truth of human person created by God in the Garden of Eden. Or at least, that is my proposition.

If you will grant the proposition – and I realize that the “if” is a big one – what can be done in the years ahead, what might be attempted, to meet this challenge? Let me propose two (obviously incomplete and inadequate) ideas, one that is general and one that is quite specific.

First, we should strive to define and defend, not merely reject, American liberalism.

There is much more under heaven, even and in some senses especially in the United States, than “pure liberalism.” On U.S. coins, the most frequently used philosophical inscription is “Liberty.” It’s as close as we come to a national motto, a one-word creed. Yet both historically and currently, two other inscriptions also appear regularly on U.S. coins, usually right next to “Liberty.” One is “E Pluribus Unum” (“From Many, One”), clearly signifying the important communitarian and civic republican bases of American democracy. The other is “In God We Trust,” just as clearly reminding us that democratic government draws legitimacy from a larger moral canopy that is not of its own making. (That’s why our pledge calls us one nation, “*under* God.”)

For this reason, at least regarding our origins, history, and repeatedly inscribed national purpose, the U.S. is *not* a country in which one of our three national mottoes must always trump the other two. Accordingly, we are not introducing a new idea when we say that the tripartite foundation of our democratic experiment – liberal natural right, civic republicanism, and faith in the divine law – only stands at all when it stands as a whole. Just check out what our money says. Or check out current historiography, where scholars such as Barry Alan Shain, in *The Myth of American Individualism*, offer important correctives to earlier historical interpretations that have overly stressed one aspect of U.S. cultural formation (usually the aspect of liberal natural right) while slighting the others.²¹

Or check out our most enduring songs. In “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” Samuel F. Smith’s first and most famous stanza speaks of a “Sweet land of liberty,” while the last stanza seeks protection from God, the “Author of liberty,” and describes American freedom as “holy light.” Similarly, in “O Beautiful For Spacious Skies,” perhaps the United States’ most beloved national song, Katharine Lee Bates offers what amounts to three prayers. The first prayer, repeated again in the final stanza, is “God shed His grace on thee [America].” The second prayer is the best answer to those who would wrongly define American freedom as unlimited freedom: “God mend thine every flaw, Confirm

²¹ Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.” The third prayer is the best answer to those who would wrongly reduce American freedom to material success: “may God thy gold refine, Till all success be nobleness and every gain divine!”

Some contemporary observers, in their rejection of the unencumbered self and of what Deitze calls “pure liberalism,” seem to suggest that the American experiment itself has failed. That the wager itself – a wager on the possibility of reconciling democratic freedom with moral truth in North America – has been lost. Here I am thinking of astute social critics such as Robert Bork in *Slouching Toward Gomorrah* and insightful Catholic theologians such as David Schindler. Their arguments are powerful, but, to me, overly pessimistic about the possibility of an American freedom protected by moral truth.

The U.S. at its best is like a jazz tune. In jazz, the underlying melodic line is well structured. The story is easy to follow. At the same time, the individual musician, encountering the tune, exercises unusual freedom: to improvise, to react spontaneously to other musicians, to complicate the rules. From this taut interplay between form and freedom, structure and improvisation, emerges the musical sensibility of jazz, a distinctively American creation.

Whether we like it or not – and I confess, much of the time I like it -- America is a jazz-like country, regularly arguing for less recital, more room for riffing. There have been so many times in our history when we have properly and morally acted to contest rules, to jazz up the melody.

But today we face a different challenge. Today we are demolishing the structure, ignoring the line, throwing away the score. Most of all, I want to suggest, we are neglecting the answer to the most essential question: Who are we? We are not recognizing the creation story of the Garden of Eden.

The result is not music, but noise -- not freedom, but a puerile, near beer version of freedom that jeopardizes, rather than enhances, the possibility of the real thing. If we continue in this direction, it seems likely that this experiment *will* fail.

Nevertheless, I hope that the goal can be protecting the liberal project from self-defeat. Not rejecting the sensibility of jazz in U.S. culture, but reclaiming the underlying form that makes a culture of jazz possible in the first place. To me, the goal is to rediscover and renew our understanding of the created human person, and with it the moral basis of the American idea.

Toward this end, we still have some unused seed corn, a few important shots still to be fired. Strategically, so many of our most persuasive arguments (say, against cloning or for life-long marriage) remain essentially obscured, since we seldom engage the debate at the level of first principles. Yet first principles may be our best argument. Specifically, I suspect that for most Americans, the understanding of the human person emergent from the State of Nature – a small autonomous self, uncreated, disconnected from others and deprived of larger meaning – is ultimately unattractive and unconvincing. At least when defined explicitly, I think most people simply do not believe in, and do not wish to be, such a person. That may be a good place to start.²²

Second, we should consider creating a Council on the Human Person.

This group would be a diverse team of scholars, from both the human and natural sciences, who would joint together for on an-going program of collaborative research and interdisciplinary deliberation, aiming to develop and disseminate publicly a unified understanding of the human person. Such a project would depend especially on leading current scholars from anthropology, human evolutionary psychology, biology, and personalist theology.²³ Such an effort would seek to connect human biology with religious personhood, aiming again, for the new century, to integrate the truths of nature, reason, and revelation into a more authentic accounting of who we are.

²²It seems clear that Pope John Paul II has been stating and developing this theme for decades. For example, discussing then-Bishop Wojtyla's interventions in the work of Vatican II (1962-65), Avery Dulles recounts: "Welcoming the idea of a dialogue with atheism, [Wojtyla] suggested that this dialogue should begin with the philosophy of the human person." These early statements on personalism also "foreshadow ideas that he was to articulate more fully in his writings as pope." See Avery Dulles, "John Paul II Theologian," *Communio* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1997), 716.

²³ A provocative effort in this direction is Don S. Browning, "Biology, Ethics, and Narrative in Christian Family Theory," in David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and David Blankenhorn, eds., *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 119-156.