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Thinking About the Way We Think

How Flexibility Can Be Fatal

a. The Micro- and Macro-Level Responses to a Crisis

This book is about the downside of flexibility. That quality, seemingly admirable, has not fared well over the long course of history. Our mainstream traditions, both secular and religious, have given us, each in their separate ways, an almost limitless capacity to see the world elastically; they teach us to fold our tents, through a near endless capacity to compromise even what every fiber of our mature brain matter knows to be correct, especially when a "crisis" calls our values into question. These traditions teach us to yield precisely at times when firmness is required. They teach us harmful lessons about effective and moral action in the world. We begin to misperceive our surroundings and to make terrible mistakes.

The opposite of flexibility is an equal but opposite conditioned reflex, an *advanced intuition* practiced by a small minority of people in our circles of thought these days to avoid such mistakes. These are the "intransigent ones." They can be awfully wrong at times, but then so can the flexible majority. They can be right, too: it is they who stood up to Hitler while most others

compromised. They know, through observation, experience, and reflection, that they may have to call on habituated patterns of coolness under fire that context and surroundings will challenge to the fullest. In "emergencies," which have become the norm, their steadfastness deserves admiration, and not only after the fact of the so-called crisis. It has been they, most recently since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, intransigent people on the right as much as on the left, who provide an unwavering allegiance to pre-9/11 traditions that have been negotiated away by flexible politicians and analysts of all persuasions.

To combat the habit of a compromised falling off from long patterns of sound behavior, these people train themselves to think within fearful and contentious situations before they act in the standard way of yielding to the new and often unwise. They stand firm, or in the words of the neuroscientists, they use "metacognition"—they *think about thinking*, digging deep and finding a reserve of calm—an "aequanimitas"[1] where the rest of us have been trained to yield to the exigencies of emotion, conformity, and compromise. They do so not only in their own living rooms, where adherence to principle is less risky and often privately admired, but also in public, the only place that needs intractable talk and sometimes action when sound behavior is otherwise negotiated away.

These people reverse the baseline tendency of the majority, who have been conditioned to give ground. Even when pursuing their steadfast practices in an unassuming manner, as most of them do until directly challenged by events, they may tend to annoy the "pragmatic" and accepting majority who resent not so much their substantive positions as the distractingly living proof they offer of consistency and integrity. Agree or disagree with the actual merits of their views on any given specific issue, we may not like such people, because their firmness alone stupefies us. Only after the fact of their self-assertiveness do they

sometimes get the credit they were not even seeking during the crisis itself. What appeared to us in the heat of the emergency as an almost mindless unwillingness to compromise gets transvalued later, as we look back at those who did not deviate from what we, pre-crisis, always knew was the correct path.

If I use the pronoun "we," it is because this book focuses less on the psychology of any individual actors—call it the "micro"—than on slowly developing patterns of social behavior—call it the "macro."[2] Neither exceptional heroism nor personal fear is at the center of this analysis; we may not all be Chesley Sullenbergers, although people looking carefully at his aircraft-saving "deliberate calm" conclude that we do in fact possess the organic capacity to draw closer to his example.[3] Practice, it turns out, is key to a calm adherence to the proven good.

Most examples of counter-flow steadfastness in these pages involve people who do not think of themselves as particularly "heroic" or in any way extraordinary. To the contrary, they see as "natural" their own sound responses and count on parallel behavior from their friends and colleagues. They call not on idiosyncratic flashes of courage but rather on unfashionable or mislabeled countertraditions that have been placed unacceptably at risk and need to be redeemed and restored rather than negotiated and compromised.

On the other side of the coin, fear and similarly individualized explanations doubtless play some role when so many, so often in history, fail to heed the call of the steadfast. I argue that fear, inspired by a sense of emergency (often exaggerated), deprives people of the mature judgment that otherwise would guide them wisely through the crisis. However, when we recognize how a small minority of ordinary people in every crisis finds a way to act soundly, and when we are learning that we can practice overcoming such fears, the place of long-standing social—rather than individualized—forces emerges more clearly and deserves close examination.

Little in our flexible and pragmatic sense world attracts us to steadfastness, which very often presents to our liberal imaginations as "stubbornness" and an unwillingness to "change." Almost anything that smacks of obstinacy is going to be unpopular, particularly when people think they are in the throes of an emergency, of some defining event or crisis that appears to require quick change from prior baselines. Yet we will find on closer examination that the intransigent few may just be asking for a preservation of what those caught in an anxiety-ridden willingness to compromise also cherish.

Indeed, *restoration of the demonstrably good*, rather than constant, fluid change, is at the heart of this counter-tradition.

Like most of my readers, or so I would imagine them, I was brought up to scorn those who will not compromise what they have concluded to be right. I am a secularist. An entire tradition of enlightened thought, coupled with the comfort most of us feel with permeability and change, positioned me to reject even a whiff of doctrinal or behavioral "rigidity." Some of this aversion is casual and relatively insignificant: on the micro level, no one wants a personality defined by others (especially one's shrink) as "rigid," and we generally do not like dealing with such personalities, either. Yet there are some recent, highly respected thinkers, such as Elaine Scarry, who counsel us to see the value, even of individualized "rigidity" (or Dr. William Osler's "immobility") in some situations of communal need.[4]

Some distaste for the seemingly "rigid" personality is shared more widely. In the media, few appreciate the monomaniacal bloviating of broadcast chatterers, unless, occasionally, their perspective flatters our own. We may, depending on our perspectives, eschew watching the inflexibly right-of-center Fox TV commentators while also telling ourselves that keying in to the uniformly blue-state views of, say, Rachel Maddow, constitutes a form of political activism.

But in these pages, I take the longer view. I evoke those who, through history, have managed to stand fast against foul winds of unwise and overhasty change and consistently to propound beliefs they hold dear, beliefs previously shared by most but then utterly compromised in the name of some needed change occasioned by a perceived or actual crisis. These are not talk show hosts with single constituencies; they are the righteous ones whose audience is their own heart and whose admirers, if usually only in the long run, are all of the rest of us.

Admiration, if it ever reaches the steadfast, comes very slowly, and rarely in their lifetimes. Even the twentieth century's greatest moral crisis, the caving of most of Europe to Hitler's dreadful policies, has left subsequent generations confused about strongly held opinions and beliefs. Within the still-living memory of some of my readers, Hitler's fanatical rhetoric reenforced a sense among many that we simply "never again" wish to hear anything—*anything*—propounded with the fierceness that is associated with those terrible times.

Blunt, unyielding rhetoric is disdained by some otherwise superb thinkers, but this is the wrong lesson to have derived from the Hitler period. The paradox I explore through historical example in these pages is that it was precisely the few *outspoken, clear, and rhetorically strong opponents* of Hitler who might have reversed the course of history if the more moderate among their listeners had heeded their unambiguous and unyielding calls to resist. Straight talk was missing where it was most needed. Instead, the multitudes—the tens of millions of ordinary Europeans who began by detesting Hitler or his surrogates outside of the Reich—displayed the quite common ability to negotiate away their own deepest beliefs and traditions. As we shall see, the best moral influences upon them—say, their own parish priests every Sunday—used at best a "coded" (indirect) language if they said anything at all about the "Jewish question."[5] It is this limitless

rhetorical and behavioral *flexibility* (rather than its opposite) that might have been called into question in our postwar responses to Hitler.[6]

Even the dictionary seems to dislike those who publicly buck the trend and decline to conform. The richness of the mother tongue stacks the deck against overly strong contrarian positions openly propounded. The thesaurus links "intransigence" to a whole host of words that codify our distaste for programmatic loyalty to fixed positions: intractable, stubborn, Pharisaic, close-minded, and stiff-necked, to name only a few derogatory synonyms. Such words set up a boundary between the "righteous"—usually perceived as "*self*-righteous"—and us. Usage in speaking about them always inclines us toward such pejoratives as "dogmatic," "hardnosed," "unyielding," "rigid," or "fanatical." I reverse the value, throughout this book, of these negative-seeming traits. I write in praise of intransigence and the many words aligned to it in common parlance.

Very recent experience only exacerbates our distaste for firmness of position. How do we think and feel after the terrible events of 9/11? Moderates otherwise unlikely to throw stones at anyone have made an exception for suspected terrorists, who seem to embody the very illness we detest: fanaticism itself. In the face of such a grave threat, boldly pursued by intractable others, we have resorted to compromising some of our own finer and previously ensconced traditions. This book wonders out loud about the pathways US policy has forged across political divides—pathways that required a good deal of flexible compromise in mapping deviations from sound pre-9/11 mutual understandings of right and wrong. Paradoxically, flexibility leads as often as its opposite to "toughness" against perceived enemies; the question to be asked is whether one or the other tends to lead to sound outcomes consistent with the baseline values that are revived when the crisis has passed.

I started to criticize my own vaunted open-mindedness when I saw the taboo on torture quickly equivocated by some of my closest colleagues. Is there a line between flexible compromise of values and the surrender of what makes those values worth fighting for? I thought a lot about what history teaches, reasonably often, when good people fail to assert their unyielding commitment to long-standing traditions of sound policy. I have become more skeptical of my own flexibility and the effects it has on my actions or nonactions. Some ingrained but unpracticed part of me, something that always realized that constant compromise can be very bad, began to reassert itself. And it reemerged not so much due to very recent compromises on eavesdropping, torture, extreme rendition, unlimited detentions, and targeted killings, but to my growing awareness of millennia-long attitudes that needed examination.

I came to understand that a serious mistake was made 2000 years ago, one that still plagues us today. The error, religious in nature, found a variant in the Enlightenment tradition of such secular thinkers as John Stuart Mill.[7] Both traditions, although otherwise opposed, ask us to understand the world flexibly. Both are joined at the hip precisely in their aversion to strongly held positions that can be characterized as inflexible. The Enlightenment pushes us to test repetitively our own embedded values, even or especially against opposed positions that we think are false; the first Christians showed us how to invade and to distort with infinite flexibility the tenets dearly held by others and then to tar those others with the brush of rigid blindness when they simply held fast to their positions. Eventually, elasticity overwhelmed us, and our own dearest beliefs became slippery and negotiable. We need to understand better how a religious perspective—not *all* religious perspectives, but some that are very familiar to my readers—dovetails with liberal malleability to produce recurring disasters.