

Funding the Future

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I was reading the new post on Substack from Aurelian last night, entitled [Mere Anarchy](#). In it, I noted he said (I use the pro-noun appropriately: I am aware that the author is male):

[These arguments] are all logically deducible from the ultra-individualist, almost autistic, mindset that Liberalism at its worst entails, and it may be worth saying just a word about that first.

Any system of radical individualism reduces relations with other people to one of three sorts. Either they are competitors, and thus a challenge to the Liberal ego and to its personal and financial freedom, or they are subordinates, to be used to secure more personal and financial benefits for yourself, or finally they are Non-Playing Characters, to be manipulated, ordered around, remonstrated with and legislated for, such that the world that results is closer to your vision of how it should be. This is to say that in a Liberal society there are no traditional links of family, community friendship, even mutual commitment. There are only coincidences of interest, to be exploited for as long as they last, and then to be abandoned. (The disastrous argument that “the personal is political” extends this thinking to personal relations, which are then seen as the equivalent of political or business alliances based purely and temporarily on mutual self-interest.)

This set me off on a train of thought. The question I asked myself was:

How does the liberal exist in the politics of care? Are the terms reconcilable?

And now, to admit that the rest of this post is something unprecedented here: I threw this question at ChatGPT and, so liked the response, I am sharing it here. I have not done this before, but there has to be a first for everything, and on this occasion, the provocations produced do, I think, justify this. So please note that what follows is not my work; I simply set the ball rolling and have not edited the response in any way:

Yes — the liberal can exist within a politics of care. But only if liberalism is stripped back to its best moral instincts and prevented from defaulting to its worst institutional habits.

So the terms are *reconcilable*, but not *automatically compatible*.

1. The problem: liberalism is morally attractive but institutionally thin

At its best, liberalism begins with a profoundly important claim:

- * *the individual matters*
- * *coercion requires justification*
- * *power is dangerous*
- * *minorities need protection from majorities*
- * *freedom of thought, speech and association are essential*

Those are not “anti-care” claims. They are often prerequisites for care — because without freedom, care turns into paternalism, discipline, or control.

But liberalism becomes hostile to a politics of care when it makes two moves:

- * *it treats society as an aggregation of individuals, rather than a set of relationships and dependencies*
- * *it treats the market as the default allocator of value, resource and reward*

That's where it goes wrong.

2. The politics of care starts where liberalism is weakest: dependency

A politics of care begins with a fact that liberal political economy routinely sidelines:

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humans are dependent and interdependent

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care is not marginal; it is foundational

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vulnerability is not exceptional; it is universal across the life course

The “liberal subject” is too often imagined as competent, informed, rational, and able to contract freely.

But care ethics says: that’s not how life works.

So the politics of care is not anti-liberal in a moral sense. It is anti-liberal abstraction.

3. Reconciling them requires a shift in what counts as “freedom”

Classical liberalism tends to define freedom as non-interference (negative liberty).

Politics of care requires freedom to be defined as *capability* (effective liberty), meaning:

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freedom from want

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freedom from fear

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freedom from domination (including economic domination)

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freedom to participate fully in society

That requires institutions.

And that is where orthodox liberalism tends to panic — because it has historically feared the state more than it fears private power.

4. The liberal can exist – but must stop pretending markets are neutral

You cannot reconcile liberalism with care if liberalism continues to treat:

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property rights as primary

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contract as morally sufficient

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markets as efficient and therefore legitimate

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inequality as tolerable if procedurally generated

A politics of care insists instead that:

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power is power, whether exercised by state, employer, landlord, or creditor

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markets distribute not just goods but status, security, health, and life chances

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exploitation is not an “accident” but a likely outcome when bargaining power is unequal

So the liberal exists in the politics of care only if liberalism becomes serious about economic power.

5. The caring liberal is possible – but looks more like Beveridge than Hayek

A liberal politics of care would emphasise:

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*the rule of law and rights as protections **against all** dominating power*

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universal public services as the infrastructure of freedom

- * a macroeconomy designed to maintain social and environmental capital, not maximise consumption
- * taxation as a civic obligation to sustain collective capacity
- * democracy as a ***caring institution*** (not merely a voting mechanism)

This kind of liberalism is less “market liberalism” and more:

- * social liberalism
- * civic republicanism
- * solidaristic constitutionalism

It is liberalism that recognises relationship, not just choice.

Conclusion

Are the terms reconcilable? Yes — but only by rejecting the liberal habit of pretending that autonomy is the natural human state and the market is a morally neutral institution.

Put simply:

- * liberalism needs care to become realistic about human life
- * care needs liberalism to protect against coercion and paternalism

So there is a viable synthesis — but it is not neoliberalism with nicer language. It is a fundamentally different political economy, in which ***care is the central public purpose*** and liberty is understood as the ability to live well, not merely the ability to be left alone.