

## Leon Kass's "The Aspirations of Humankind—Athens, Jerusalem, Gettysburg"

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From a [symposium](#) on Leon Kass's  
*Leading a Worthy Life: Finding Meaning in Modern Times* (Encounter Books, 2017)  
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For the first 312 pages of *Leading a Worthy Life*, Leon Kass is concerned with thoroughly modern problems—the challenges to worthy living posed by contemporary technology and culture, especially biotechnology, sexual liberation, illiberal education, and personal self-absorption. He then concludes with 67 pages on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, from about 2,400 years ago; the Ten Commandments of Exodus and the Hebrew Bible, from 3,300–3,500 years ago, and the Gettysburg Address, from 154 years ago.

What are these three essays doing in a book about "Finding Meaning in Modern Times"? For many authors of Kass's range and prolificacy, one would be tempted to say: Well, it's just an essay collection, and these ones are really good and interesting, so he may have just tossed them in at the end. And it's true that there is a good deal of old-school thinking in his earlier chapters (once when we were working together at AEI, Leon suggested to me that the Institute might be renamed "The Old School for Social Research").

But that would be a mistake where Leon is concerned, for with him everything is suited to a purpose. The most striking feature of his writing and teaching is careful attention to structure and context. An action or idea can be understood and criticized only in relation to other actions and ideas. A great text can be understood and criticized only by reading words, phrases, and sentences as components of a larger structure—oar to oar, so to speak, with many oars working in cooperation to propel the reader in a certain direction. This may reflect the influence of Leo Strauss; but my wife, who is a medical doctor, thinks it may reflect Leon's medical training, where one studies individual organs and systems not only for their own attributes and functions but also, and critically, for how they operate as part of a whole body and person.

In any event, Leon says in his Introduction that he has organized his essays into a coherent structure with a deliberate purpose, and we should take his words as seriously as he takes the words of others. If we do, and if we read his exegeses of the *Ethics*, the Ten Commandments, and the Gettysburg Address as carefully as he has written them, we will see their salience to his contemporary concerns. Of course, any work that endures through centuries and millennia has found audiences in many different times and places. But I have in mind specific reasons why these works are pertinent to the world of the twenty-first century.

First and foremost, all three are works of individualism, and were radically so for their times. They are not concerned with the sweep of impersonal history, or with abstract ideas of goodness and badness, or with individuals as passive vessels of forces beyond their control. Rather they are concerned with the individual whose most important attribute is freedom—the capacity to make choices that have consequences and that invite the judgements of their fellow men and of God. Freedom, moreover, exercised in progressively (though not chronologically) greater states of human equality. Aristotle was no democrat, but his individual man made choices whose worth depended on the choices of other, equally empowered men, and who was affected by the opinions of those equals and who forged friendships with them. God had just freed the children of Israel from bondage and was instructing them in how to conduct themselves as free and equal beings, both in relation to God and in relation to their neighbors who had equal obligations and rights. (God was also, implicitly, insisting on the fundamental equality of men and women, an insistence Jesus would later run with.) Lincoln propounded a new integration of freedom and equality: The equality of the Declaration was not the self-evident truth it had declared, but rather a proposition to be tested; if Americans met the test they would give birth to a new and larger form of freedom, one grounded in democratic equality.

From these modern premises of individual freedom and equality—modern because they were themselves foundational—our three authors move in directions that are often at odds with modern sentiments and practices. We know from Aristotle himself, from the Book of Exodus and those that follow, and from the history of post-Civil War America that our authors' precepts were widely disregarded by their immediate contemporaries and audiences. But Leon's interpretations of their texts emphasize teachings that seem to me addressed to characteristic failings of our own age. Let me mention three.

First is the importance of conduct as opposed to being or identity. Aristotelian happiness, and Godly virtue, can be achieved, or even understood, only through activity. Lincoln's compatriots who had gathered to dedicate a battlefield could do so only by dedicating themselves to a great and difficult unfinished task. This is not the modern "watch what I do, not what I say"—Aristotle highly valued learning, conversing, and nobility of spirit; God commanded a Sabbath day of desisting from activity, and forbade false witness and the internal state of covetousness; Lincoln's special calling was to inspire men through words and poetry. Instead, our teachers regard human goodness as the potential of freedom in action, transcending inherited status, personal feelings, and professed ideals. Human action includes that most distinctively human of activities, conscious reflection and learning. But right action also depends on habituation—to a significant extent, a man does noble or virtuous deeds not by rational deduction from abstract principles but by adopting the habits of others who are noble or virtuous.

Second is the importance of community and citizenship and their relation to larger “aspirations of humankind.” Aristotle draws what he believes to be universal ethical lessons from the conduct of specific men in specific circumstances—and makes clear that true human flourishing and nobility can be realized only within a group or polity that admires and makes way for flourishing and nobility. The God of Exodus is instructing his chosen tribe with rules derived from His immediate experience with them, but at the same time is addressing all of humankind. The Civil War was a test not only of the United States of America but of any nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to equality—and the war’s result would determine whether democratic self-rule would survive or perish from the earth. In every case, universal aspirations depend on the conduct of individuals within, and subject to, concrete political communities. There are many lessons here for today’s transnational bureaucrats on the one hand and America Firsters on the other, and for practitioners of identity politics. The general proposition is that attachment to one’s group—racial, ethnic, religious, national—is natural and worthy, but ought to be a vehicle for pursuing transcendent goods, both individual and universal.

Third, and most un-hip of all, is the importance of honor and sanctity. Aristotle’s great-souled man does not care for honor, regarding it as a petty thing, but he accepts it—because it enables him to continue to do great deeds and because it inspires others to follow his example. God commands us to worship Him (and only Him), and to honor our father and mother (regardless of their personal merits or lack thereof). Lincoln, Leon reminds us, had long worried that the mystic chords of memory of the founding fathers had attenuated; at Gettysburg, he used biblical allusions and reverential cadences to inspire a new generation to rededicate themselves to the founders’ unfinished work, urging that “from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.” As against the modern practice of pronouncing absolutely everything “awesome,” we are instructed to submit to genuine awe and reverence for that which is noble and perfect beyond our capacities and often beyond our comprehension.

My three propositions are terribly oversimplified—each one admits of many qualifications and elaborations which you can grasp only by buying and reading Leon’s awesome book. But let me conclude in this spirit by saying that the most important contemporary lesson I have learned from these essays is entirely inductive, growing from Leon’s studious attention to structure and context that I mentioned at the outset. The *Nicomachean Ethics*, the Ten Commandments, and the Gettysburg Address are profoundly complex, intricate, subtle works. They need to be read, studied, unpacked, reassembled, tested against experience, and argued over for long periods of time before they can be even minimally understood. And Leon is their ideal exegete, who teaches us of meanings in individual phrases that are absent from the

phrases themselves and live in their relation to other parts of the whole. In the terminology of modern constitutional interpretation, Leon is not a textualist but a structuralist.

This is not to say that Aristotle, Lincoln, or God almighty are practitioners of situational ethics! Rather, they see human living as highly, in some respects infinitely, complicated and deep, and moral reasoning as commensurately complicated and not reducible to simple rules or aphorisms. They are in this respect fundamentally opposed to the modern spirit of simplification. Science, for example, is based on reductionism and objectification—on breaking every phenomenon down into ever-smaller physical pieces and explaining their workings as parsimoniously as possible. This has been a brilliant invention, with many phenomenal discoveries and blessings to show for it—but it errs and leads us seriously astray when it proposes to settle every question of human life mechanistically.

Modern politics and popular culture are similarly, but less productively, animated by simplification and reductionism. Sensation-seeking tweets and focus-group-tested talking points obliterate the actual complexity of political questions. Pop music and visual and narrative art strip down to the most elementary of urges and emotions. And consider competitive sports, where high excellence requires an impossible combination of skill, precision, strength, speed, aggressiveness, judgement, and mental discipline applied variously across a range of distinct activities. But television wants to reduce all of it to a few seconds of spectacle—to the throbbing excitement of a touchdown pass or a final sprint to the finish line—enhanced with tear-jerking stories about a competitor’s uncle who has psoriasis. These practices are inducements to passivity, to confusing feeling for thinking and certitude for truth; they dull our appreciation of freedom in action.

Several decades ago, Pat Moynihan said: what the world needs now is great complexifiers. These three great, complex works, faithfully expounded by Leon Kass, have come down to us from ancients, and call us to aspire above modern primitivisms.