



The Vacuum of Solidarity — Why Proceduralism Cannot Substitute for Ontology

I. Introduction: The Symptom of "Institutional Exhaustion"

Something is being attempted in American public life that deserves more scrutiny than it has received.

At institutions like the Miller Center at the University of Virginia, serious thinkers—James Davison Hunter among them—are calling for a return to common ground, a renewal of public ethics, something they describe as a *Third Founding*. The diagnosis is not wrong. The institutions are exhausted. The middle has collapsed. Civic life has become a theater of mutual incomprehension in which the loudest voices speak past one another with increasing contempt and decreasing contact with reality.

The call for renewal is understandable. It is also, in its present form, insufficient—not because the intention is wrong, but because the level of intervention is wrong.

What is being proposed is cultural and behavioral reconstruction: rebuild the norms, restore the habits, recover the civic virtues, find the exhausted middle and reinhabit it. This is late-stage institutional thought at its most earnest—and a precise illustration of the problem it seeks to solve.

The *Exhausted Middle* is not a political failure. It is a **metabolic failure**.

A political failure can be addressed at the level of politics—new coalitions, better leadership, reformed institutions. A metabolic failure cannot. Metabolism names the process by which a living system sustains itself from within. When metabolism fails, the system does not need reorganization. It needs ground.

What has failed in American civic life is not the arrangement of its parts. It is the ontological substrate from which those parts derived their coherence. Solidarity—genuine solidarity, the kind that makes pluralism possible—is not a negotiable horizontal value that can be rebuilt through cultural initiative. It is a derived state. It hangs, in the precise sense of the Greek *krematai*, on a shared account of reality. Remove that account, and solidarity does not weaken. It becomes structurally impossible.

This is what the renewal projects have not seen, or have seen and declined to name: the attempt to rebuild social cohesion at the level of culture and behavior *presupposes the continued existence of a*



shared prior—a common ontological grammar within which cultural disagreement can occur. That prior has not merely weakened. It has been evacuated. Systematically, institutionally, over the course of generations, under the banner of neutrality.

The crisis, therefore, is not disagreement within a shared world.

It is disagreement over the structure of reality itself.

No procedural mechanism can resolve that. No cultural initiative can restore what only ontological ground can provide. No institutional reform can stabilize a system whose foundations have been removed. These are not political claims. They are structural ones. And their implications are severe. Without a shared ontological floor, pluralism does not merely become difficult. It becomes unstable in a specific and predictable way. The vacuum does not remain empty. Power moves into it—immediately, inevitably, and wearing whatever uniform the moment provides. The likely outcome of the renewal projects, absent a recovery of ground, is not the renewed unity they seek. It is the consolidation of **procedural authoritarianism** as a substitute for the coherence that only reality can supply.

That is the argument of this essay.

II. The Institutionalization of Ontological Evacuation

The evacuation did not announce itself.

It arrived under the name of neutrality—and neutrality, as presented, seemed not only reasonable but necessary. A society containing multiple religions, competing philosophies, and irreconcilable moral traditions required, or so the argument ran, a public space that did not privilege any of them. The vertical axis: truth, being, moral order—would be bracketed. What remained would be procedure: the rules of engagement that allowed difference to coexist without adjudication.

This was presented as tolerance. It was, in structural terms, amputation.

Neutrality, properly understood, means impartiality within a shared reality—the refusal to favor one party over another while both remain accountable to *what is*. What modern institutions gradually redefined as neutrality is something categorically different: the removal of any binding account of

reality from public reasoning altogether. Not impartiality within the real, but the *evacuation of the real as a shared reference point*.

The consequences were not immediate. They accumulated.

Culture, no longer anchored to a reality it was meant to reflect, *became self-referential*. Norms ceased to be derived from what is and became instead the outputs of negotiation, construction, and consensus. The question “is this true?” was quietly replaced by the question “can this be agreed upon?” — which is not a refinement of the first question but its *abolition*.

The semantic drift that followed was not accidental. It was the inevitable expression of the structural shift.

Solidarity, which names an ontological achievement—the recognition of shared humanity grounded in a common account of what human beings are—became a *social preference*. It was retained as a term of approval while its foundation was removed. What had been a structural consequence of shared reality became a negotiable value, subject to revision by consensus and susceptible to weaponization by whoever controlled the terms of negotiation.

Civility underwent the same transformation. Where it had named a virtue—a disposition grounded in the recognition of the other as a truth-bearing subject within a shared moral order—it became *behavioral compliance*. A matter of tone rather than perception. A code of conduct rather than a form of seeing.

Ethics completed the sequence. Constraint by reality—the recognition that certain actions damage the structural conditions under which human beings remain whole, regardless of preference or consensus—became negotiated alignment. Ethics was retained as a word while its load-bearing function was transferred from ontology to *procedure*.

What emerged from this transformation was not disorder. That is what makes it so difficult to diagnose. What emerged was a system that *appeared* ordered—that possessed all the outward features of coherence, all the institutional forms of legitimacy—while lacking the metabolic ground from which genuine order derives. Procedure substituted for truth. Process substituted for judgment. Administrative normativity substituted for moral reality.

The void did not look like a void. It looked like a very busy set of institutions.



That is the precise character of the failure. Not collapse, but *simulation*. Not the absence of structure, but the presence of structure detached from ground—a void masked, with considerable sophistication, by the appearance of order.

III. The Founders' Formation

There is a myth about the origin of the American experiment that has become so pervasive it functions as an assumption: that the republic was founded on procedural neutrality—a deliberate bracketing of metaphysical commitments in favor of a framework capacious enough to contain them all. On this reading, the genius of the Founding was precisely its refusal to privilege any particular account of reality. The Constitution, the argument runs, is an instrument of managed disagreement, not a derivative of shared truth.

This is historically false. And its falseness matters enormously for what follows.

The men who designed the American republic were not metaphysically neutral. They were metaphysically formed—shaped by an intellectual inheritance so thoroughly internalized that its assumptions felt not like commitments but like facts. That inheritance was not procedural. It was **ontological**. And it was **shared**.

Its sources were three, synthesized over centuries into a coherent grammar of reality.

From **classical Greece** came the conviction that reality is causally structured and teleologically ordered—that things have natures, that natures have ends, and that ethics is the discipline of aligning human action with those ends. Aristotle's categories were not academic furniture. They were the conceptual architecture within which moral and political reasoning operated.

From **classical Rome** came the tradition of natural law as civic inheritance—Cicero's insistence that law is not the arbitrary expression of sovereign will but the formalization of a moral order discoverable by reason and binding on all human beings by virtue of their common nature. Duty was not invented. It was recognized.

From **Christian metaphysics**—principally through Aquinas—came the synthesis: natural law grounded in the intelligibility of creation, the hierarchy of being as the framework within which



human dignity was located, and the conviction that truth is not constructed but discovered by minds capable of conforming themselves to what is.

Reality, within this inheritance, was understood as **intelligible, ordered, and binding**. Not as a projection of human preference, not as a negotiated framework, but as a structured given that imposed genuine constraint on thought, action, and institution.

The educational formation that produced the Founders reflected this inheritance precisely. The classical trivium is grammar, rhetoric, logic. Ethics was part of the quadrivium's moral philosophy. This was not merely a curriculum. It was a sequence of formation. Logic trained the mind to apprehend truth. Rhetoric trained the tongue to express it faithfully. Ethics trained the will to align life with the good. Education was not the accumulation of information. It was the formation of perception—the slow discipline of seeing reality as it is.

What this produced, politically, was a shared ontological grammar. The Founders disagreed—sometimes bitterly, on questions of considerable consequence. But their disagreements occurred within a shared horizon. They argued about how to order reality. They did not argue about whether reality existed, whether truth was discoverable, whether persons possessed dignity prior to legal recognition, or whether law derived its authority from a moral order beyond itself. Those were not open questions. They were the ground on which all questions stood.

This is why pluralism functioned. Not because metaphysical commitments were absent, but because they were present—shared deeply enough to constitute a common frame within which genuine difference could be navigated. It was not the absence of ontological agreement that made the experiment possible. It was its presence.

The proof does not require more than the document they signed.

One hundred percent of the signatories to the Declaration of Independence—men of divergent temperaments, competing interests, and irreconcilable views on many questions—agreed on this: that certain rights are *inalienable*. Not granted by government. Not negotiated among parties. Not constructed by consensus. Inalienable—incapable of being transferred, surrendered, or revoked, because they *do not originate in human will*.

That single agreement is more philosophically significant than it appears.



To affirm inalienable rights is not merely to make a political claim. It is to make an ontological one. It presupposes that human beings possess a nature—a fixed account of what they are—that exists prior to and independent of any legal or political framework. It presupposes that this nature is knowable—that reason can apprehend it and derive from it genuine obligations. It presupposes that truth in this domain is discovered, not constructed—that rights are recognized, not invented.

In other words: inalienability presupposes ontology. It presupposes epistemology. It presupposes anthropology. And from those three, ethics follows by necessity.

The Founders may not have agreed on the full architecture of the transcendent. They agreed on enough. A shared toehold in ontological reality—the inalienability of rights grounded in a fixed human nature knowable by reason—is sufficient to anchor the entire cascade. Ontology, epistemology, anthropology, and ethics: the first four of the five elements required to complete a classical **Unified Philosophical System (UPS)**. A Unified Philosophical System does not require metaphysical unanimity. It requires a non-negotiable floor. The Declaration provides one, written in the hand of men who did not know they were doing philosophy and were doing it anyway.

The stability was not procedural. It was ontological. Procedure derived its legitimacy from the ground beneath it. Analysis served reality. It did not replace it.

What changed—gradually, then decisively—was not the procedures. It was the ground.

The disagreement that now fractures American public life is not the disagreement the Founders knew—argument within a shared world about how best to order it. It is something categorically different: disagreement over *the structure of reality itself*. Whether truth exists *independent of power*. Whether persons possess *inherent dignity* or only *assigned status*. Whether law discovers *moral order* or merely enforces *political will*.

That shift is not a political development. It is a civilizational one. And no procedural reform can address it, because procedure was never the source of the coherence it is now being asked to restore.

IV. The Failure of Pluralism

Pluralism, as currently practiced and defended, rests on a claim that is philosophically untenable.



The claim is this: that a society can sustain genuine difference—of religion, philosophy, moral tradition, and ultimate commitment—*without* any shared metaphysical ground. That the procedures of liberal democracy are sufficient to contain disagreement without requiring agreement on the nature of reality, the structure of the human person, or the source of moral obligation. That neutrality on the deepest questions is not merely possible but constitutive of a free society.

This is not a description of how pluralism works. It is a description of how pluralism fails.

The structural reality is the opposite of the claim. Pluralism does not eliminate the need for shared metaphysical commitments. It presupposes them—quietly, continuously, and at every level of its operation.

Consider what the procedural order actually requires in order to function.

Rights require a fixed account of the human person. To assert that someone possesses a right is to assert something about *what they are*—that they are the kind of being whose dignity is not contingent on legal recognition, whose nature imposes genuine obligations on others, whose claims cannot be dissolved by majority preference. This is an anthropological claim. It derives from ontology. Remove the fixed account of the human person, and rights become not inalienable but negotiable—not discovered but assigned, and therefore reassignable.

Law requires stable meaning. For a legal system to function — not merely to operate, but to function as law rather than as force—its terms must mean something that is not infinitely revisable by whoever holds interpretive authority at a given moment. Meaning of this kind presupposes a teleological order: the recognition that words refer to realities, that realities have natures, and that those natures constrain interpretation. Evacuate ontology, and legal language does not become neutral. It becomes a site of power—a resource to be captured and deployed by whoever can most effectively control its definition.

Speech itself requires truth as more than preference. The capacity for genuine public discourse—argument, persuasion, the exchange of reasons that might actually change minds—presupposes that claims can be true or false independent of the preferences of the speaker. Once truth is reduced to preference, speech does not become free. It becomes strategic. Rhetoric replaces reason. Volume replaces validity. The discourse that pluralism requires in order to sustain itself becomes the first casualty of the metaphysical evacuation pluralism demands.

The hidden dependency, once visible, is everywhere.

Shared definitions. Shared constraints. Shared intelligibility. These are not the outputs of procedural negotiation. They are its preconditions. Procedure does not generate them. It inherits them—and spends them, gradually, without replenishment.

The break, when it comes, is not dramatic. It is cumulative.

Once ontology is evacuated, meanings do not immediately fragment. They drift. Categories do not immediately dissolve. They blur. Obligations do not immediately lose binding force. They become contestable—and then contested—and then merely asserted by whoever possesses the institutional authority to enforce them. The process takes generations. But its direction is not reversible by procedural means, because procedure was never the source of the coherence it is now losing.

What emerges from this process is a new condition—one that is categorically different from the pluralism the system was designed to manage.

The old pluralism was disagreement within a shared world. Parties argued from different positions, appealed to different authorities, reached different conclusions—but did so within a common frame that constrained what counted as an argument, what counted as evidence, and what counted as a person whose claims demanded recognition.

The new condition is not disagreement within a shared world. It is disagreement over the structure of reality itself. Whether truth exists independent of power. Whether the human person possesses inherent dignity or only assigned status. Whether moral obligation is discovered or constructed. Whether the past binds the present or only the present exists.

These are not political disagreements. They are ontological ones. And procedural systems are not equipped to resolve them—because procedural systems presuppose their resolution. When the ground that procedure inherited is gone, procedure does not adapt. It inflates. It multiplies rules to compensate for the loss of principles. It expands enforcement to substitute for the consent that shared reality once provided.

Pluralism, under these conditions, does not merely struggle. It becomes structurally impossible—not as a political aspiration, but as a functional reality. What remains is the machinery of pluralism running on empty: the forms of democratic procedure sustained by the inertia of institutional



memory, while the ontological substrate that gave those forms their meaning continues its quiet evacuation.

The vacuum is now present. What fills it is the subject of the next section.

V. The Emergence of the Vacuum — The Synthetic Sinai

The Exhausted Middle is not where moderates go to find each other. It is what remains when the ontological ground that once made disagreement navigable has been removed. It is not a space of moderation. It is a vacuum—the precise shape left behind by the evacuation described in the preceding sections.

Vacuums do not remain empty. This one did not.

What moved into it was not chaos. Chaos would have been, in certain respects, more honest. What moved into it was **administration**—the systematic attempt to recreate, through procedural means, the authority, normativity, and cohesion that ontological ground once provided naturally. Rules multiplied. Policies proliferated. Bureaucratic enforcement expanded to cover the territory that shared moral reality once held without effort.

The result deserves a name. Call it the **Synthetic Sinai**.

At Sinai, law was given—binding, authoritative, grounded in a reality that transcended the community receiving it. Its authority derived not from the consent of the governed but from the nature of *what is*. The law did not create the moral order. It expressed it.

The Synthetic Sinai inverts this entirely. It is a constructed system of binding norms without a grounding reality—law without ontology, authority without metaphysical legitimacy, commandments issued from no mountain and backed by no reality beyond the institutional power of those who issue them. It wears the form of law. It lacks the substance. What it possesses in place of substance is enforcement—and enforcement must do the work that reality, when present, does without effort.

This is not a tendency. It is a necessity.



When reality no longer binds, enforcement *must* replace it. This is not a political observation about the temptations of administrative power. *It is a structural consequence of the evacuation.* Coherence must come from somewhere. If it cannot come from the recognition of a shared reality—if it cannot be discovered, because there is nothing shared to discover—it must be imposed. The less reality binds, the more administration must enforce. There is no third option. A society cannot simply operate without coherence. It will find it somewhere, or have it supplied.

The direction this takes is not a matter of ideological preference. It follows from the logic of the situation. **Without ontological constraint**—without a reality that stands independent of institutional will and imposes genuine limits on what can be legitimately commanded—**procedure becomes absolute**. There is nothing above it to which appeal can be made. Enforcement replaces persuasion, because persuasion requires a shared standard of truth to which both parties are accountable, and that standard has been evacuated. Power replaces truth, not because the powerful choose to be dishonest, but because truth, as a shared public reality, is no longer available to constrain them.

The **procedural authoritarianism** that emerges from this dynamic is not a deviation from the project of metaphysical neutrality. It is its *logical conclusion*. Neutrality did not produce a stable equilibrium. It produced a vacancy. And power—institutional, ideological, administrative—moved to fill it, as power always does, wearing whatever uniform the moment of its arrival required. A synthetic order cannot repair a failure caused by the loss of reality.

That sentence is not rhetorical. It is structural. The Synthetic Sinai cannot restore what it was built to replace, because the tool is not adequate to the task. You cannot reconstruct an ontological floor with procedural materials. You cannot generate shared intelligibility through administrative decree. You cannot produce genuine solidarity—the kind that hangs, in the sense of *krematai*, on a shared account of what human beings are —by multiplying the rules that govern their interaction.

The renewal projects fail at precisely this point. Not because their intentions are wrong. Not because their diagnoses are entirely mistaken. But because they are attempting to repair, at the level of culture and procedure, a failure that originates at the level of ontology.

| *A structure built in the absence of ground cannot restore what only ground can provide.*



Which raises the question the next two sections must answer: what does it look like when both available responses to the vacuum—procedural reconstruction on one side, populist reaction on the other—fail by the same structural logic? And what would it mean to go deeper than either?

VI. The Janus Coin — Proceduralism, Populism, and the Generator

Function

Once normativity is no longer grounded in reality, power does not wait. It moves into the vacancy immediately, and it arrives wearing two different uniforms.

This is what the present political landscape actually is—not a contest between opposing visions of the good, but a single coin with two faces, each presenting itself as the alternative to the other, each drawing its energy from the same vacuum, each incapable of restoring what neither possesses.

The first face is procedural power. It speaks the language of process, inclusion, equity, and administrative authority. It legitimates itself through procedure rather than truth—through the correct application of the correct rules by the correctly credentialed institutions. It is not wrong that its opponents call it authoritarian. What it misses is that the authoritarianism is not a deviation from its commitments. It is their structural consequence. When procedure is absolute—when there is nothing above it to which appeal can be made—enforcement is not a tool of last resort. It is the only tool available.

The second face is populist reaction. It speaks the language of sovereignty, authenticity, restoration, and the will of the people. It legitimates itself not through procedure but through grievance—through the felt reality of displacement, the recognition that something has been lost, the conviction that those responsible must be named and opposed. It is not wrong that its opponents call it dangerous. What it misses is that naming the enemy incorrectly does not constitute a diagnosis. It constitutes a misfire.

What the two faces share is more significant than what divides them.

Neither can invoke truth. Truth, as a shared public reality that imposes genuine constraint on institutional will, has been evacuated from the public square by the neutrality project both sides inherited and neither has questioned. The competition between them is therefore not between right and wrong. It is not between a correct diagnosis and an incorrect one. It is between competing



power systems operating in the absence of ground—each attempting to fill the vacuum the other helped create, each using the vocabulary of legitimacy while lacking its substance.

The Janus coin does not have a correct face. It has two incorrect ones.

This is not a symmetric moral judgment. The diagnostic failure of populism deserves particular attention—not because populism is morally inferior to proceduralism, but because its failure is instructive in a specific way.

The anger that drives populist movements is not irrational. It is a rational response to real structural damage—to the lived experience of displacement, declining wages, community dissolution, and the quiet disappearance of a world in which ordinary effort produced ordinary sufficiency. The damage is real. The response to it is not delusional. What fails is not the perception of injury but the identification of its cause.

Populism, in every form it has taken, identifies the symptom's nearest visible cause. Elites. Immigrants. Globalists. A particular party, institution, or cultural class. These identifications are not entirely wrong—the named parties are often participants in the dynamic being described. But they are not the generator function. They are downstream effects of a mechanism that populism, thus far, has lacked the analytical architecture to reach.

The actual generator function operates at a level of abstraction that requires precisely the kind of ontological and economic grounding that populist movements have not possessed. It is this: endogenous credit creation by commercial banks at the unit level, producing artificial asset-price inflation that is systematically decoupled from real value creation. Wealth accumulates not through productive contribution but through proximity to the point of money creation. Those with access to credit at the moment of its creation capture the asset appreciation that follows. Those without that access—the many, working with wages rather than leverage—find themselves displaced not through any failure of virtue or effort but through the architecture of the system itself.

This is not inequality produced by supply and demand. It is inequality produced by quantity-of-money changes created endogenously through credit—unnatural inequality, in the precise sense that it does not reflect the differential productive contributions of persons but the differential positions of persons within a monetary architecture designed, whether intentionally or not, to transfer wealth from the many to the few through the mechanics of asset inflation.

Populism feels this. It cannot name it. And because it cannot name it, it cannot propose a remedy adequate to the cause. Scapegoating is not reconstruction. Grievance is not diagnosis. The wound is real. The treatment is wrong.

Which raises a threshold question worth stating directly.

If populism ever produced leadership intelligent enough to correctly identify these generator functions—to ground the diagnosis not in grievance but in ontology, not in the nearest visible enemy but in the structural mechanisms producing the damage—to propose reconstruction rather than scapegoating, restoration of the generator function rather than punishment of its beneficiaries—what would we call that movement?

It would no longer be populism. The distinction between populism and what it could become is not moral. It is not a matter of better intentions or more virtuous leadership. It is diagnostic precision. Populism feels the wound. **Integral Liberty** finds the cause.

This is not a separate problem inserted into the argument. It is the same structural displacement—the same severance of representation from reality, the same optimization of symbolic systems against the substrate they were meant to serve—instantiated in the architecture of money. The monetary system is the economic expression of the ontological failure this essay has been tracing. Credit creation decoupled from real value production is **runaway local optimization** in its most consequential form.

One further point must be made before this section closes, and it concerns the epistemic status of what is being proposed.

Integral Liberty does not require universal acceptance to do the work this essay asks of it. The minimum claim is already decisive. A non-theological unified philosophical system—one that derives ethics from ontology through epistemology and anthropology, without circularity, without infinite regress, and without theological premise—is constructible. Whether *Integral Liberty* represents the final and definitive achievement of that construction will be determined by sustained academic engagement over decades. That determination has not yet been made, and intellectual honesty requires acknowledging it.

What has been demonstrated, and what no serious engagement with the system has yet refuted, is that the path exists. That demonstration alone is sufficient to dissolve the assumption on which



proceduralism rests its claim to necessity—the assumption that in the absence of theological grounding, procedural neutrality is the only available alternative. **It is not.** The path to a secular ontological floor, derivable from first principles and capable of hosting both sacred and secular traditions within genuine pluralism, has been opened. Whether *Integral Liberty* has walked it all the way to the end is a question for the academy. That it can be walked is no longer a question at all.

VII. The IL UPS — Restoration of the Vertical Axis

The reader who has followed the argument to this point may have a remaining objection. It is the strongest objection available, and it deserves to be stated directly before it is answered.

The objection is this: any proposed ontological ground is simply another power system in disguise. Every claim to have found the neutral floor turns out, on inspection, to be the imposition of one tradition's metaphysics on those who do not share it. The history of such claims is not encouraging. Why should this one be different?

The answer is not another proposal. It is a finding.

What follows does not re-argue the proofs on which it rests. Those proofs — the eliminative derivation of the ontological primary, the resolution of Agrippa's Trilemma, the formal elimination of structural realism, the derivation of the four operations of evil — are developed in full in *Integral Liberty, Volumes I–IV*, and in *The Parables of Jesus*. They are cited in the endnotes. What this section does is apply conclusions that have been established elsewhere to the civilizational diagnosis the preceding sections have traced.

Two constraint systems have been derived from entirely independent epistemic starting points, by the same author, without either being constructed with the other in mind. The first is the **Integral Liberty Ethics Engine (ILEE)**—derived through eliminative ontological reasoning from first principles, proceeding through transcendental constraint mapping, testing candidate ontological positions against admissibility criteria and retaining only what survives. It is **purely secular-scientific** in its method. It makes no theological appeal at any point in its derivation.

The second is the **Jesus Christ Hermeneutic Ethics Engine (JCHEE)**—derived through theological reasoning from a single passage: Matthew 22:35–40, in which Christ provides what this author has elsewhere called a foolproof hermeneutic—the interpretive rule by which all law and



prophecy must be read. It is **purely theological** in its derivation. It makes no appeal to secular philosophy or scientific constraint.

These two systems, built from opposite directions, arrive at **near-perfect congruence**.

This is not a rhetorical flourish. It is confirmational evidence of a specific and significant kind. When two independent derivations—one secular, one theological, sharing no premises and borrowing no conclusions from each other—converge on the same ethical architecture, the most parsimonious explanation is not coincidence. It is that both are tracking the same underlying structural reality. Not expressing contingent cultural preferences. Not encoding the biases of a particular tradition. Tracking something that both traditions, from their different angles of approach, independently locate.

The optimized Venn—the largest possible shared floor within which genuine pluralism can operate—is therefore not a political proposal awaiting acceptance. It is the recognition of a convergence that has *already occurred*. Sacred and secular communities can inhabit this ground simultaneously, not because they have negotiated a compromise, but because their own independent derivations point to the same floor.

A proposal can be rejected. A finding must be engaged.

Two independent witnesses to the same structural reality constitute the strongest possible confirmation short of formal proof. The convergence does not merely make the shared floor plausible. It raises its achievability by at least one order of magnitude.

What, then, is that floor?

It begins with a **non-negotiable ontological primary**: reality exists independent of human construction, and it imposes genuine constraint on thought, action, and systems. This is not a theological claim. It is the conclusion that survives eliminative testing—the sole remainder after matter, information, process, and structure have each been shown insufficient as ontological primaries. What remains is **intrinsic intelligibility**: a reality that is not merely described by rational inquiry but constituted by it at the deepest level—a *Logos*, in the minimal philosophical sense, that grounds the binding force of reason itself.



From this primary, the cascade follows by necessity. **Ontology** fixes the terms of **epistemology**. Epistemology constrains **anthropology**. Anthropology grounds **ethics**. Nothing downstream may negate what it presupposes upstream. This is Integral Liberty's Unified Philosophical System—the direction of dependence made explicit, the architecture within which genuine pluralism becomes possible because genuine constraint becomes available.

The system also dissolves what has appeared to be an intractable epistemological problem. *Agrippa's Trilemma*—the ancient argument that all justification ends in infinite regress, circularity, or arbitrary assumption—appears inescapable only if intelligibility is treated as something to be derived from a prior non-intelligible reality. The IL UPS reverses the starting point. Intelligibility is not derived. It is the precondition of any derivation whatsoever. Any attempt to deny it presupposes it. The trilemma is not resolved within its own terms. It is shown to be inapplicable—a problem that arises only when the wrong starting point has been assumed.

From this ontological floor, the structural principle that governs the entire argument of this essay becomes visible in its fullest form.

The Greek word *krematai*—used in Matthew 22:40, “on these two commandments *hang* all the law and the prophets”—names a relationship of structural dependence. The horizontal hangs on the vertical. Ethics, solidarity, civic life, and the possibility of genuine pluralism are not self-sustaining. They depend on a prior—on a vertical axis of truth and ontological reality from which they derive their coherence and their force. Remove the vertical, and the horizontal does not weaken. It collapses. Not gradually. Structurally.

This is not a theological observation imported into political philosophy. It is a structural principle demonstrated independently by both ILEE and JCHEE, and confirmed by the analysis of every preceding section of this essay. *The Parables of Jesus*—read not as devotional literature but as a systematic demonstration of this architecture across the full corpus of Christ's teaching—makes the same point with a precision that deserves to be stated directly.

The Coherence Test, developed at length in that work, shows that the pathologies of moral and institutional life are not random. They are the predictable consequences of a single structural error: the severance of the vertical from the horizontal, or the horizontal from the vertical.



Legalism is the vertical without the horizontal. It preserves truth in form while severing it from relation. The result is rigidity—correctness without perception, precision without coherence. The law is upheld, but the person is no longer seen.

Relativism is the horizontal without the vertical. It elevates relation while detaching it from truth. The result is sentimentality—concern without grounding, responsiveness without order. The person is affirmed, but the structure that sustains relation is lost.

Proceduralism is the institutionalization of that severance.

It is **not** a third option. It is the systematic encoding of the error into the architecture of governance—the attempt to sustain civic life by running the horizontal without the vertical, to maintain solidarity without ontological ground, to preserve the forms of moral community while evacuating the reality from which those forms derived their meaning.

Ethics is not constructed. It is derived—from the structure of reality itself, through the cascade that ontology makes possible. The renewal projects fail not because they lack good intentions but because they are attempting to reconstruct the horizontal while leaving the vertical evacuated. That cannot succeed. The horizontal hangs on the vertical. Always. Whether or not the institutions charged with managing it acknowledge the fact.

VIII. The ILEE — From Behavioral Alignment to Ontological Constraint

The renewal projects have a preferred instrument. They call it **alignment**.

Alignment, as currently practiced and proposed, means the coordination of institutional behavior around agreed-upon norms—the attempt to bring actors into conformity with a shared set of expectations through incentives, enforcement, and the gradual socialization of correct conduct. It is sophisticated, often technically impressive, and **entirely inadequate** to the problem it claims to address.

Alignment operates at the level of *surface coordination*. It manages outputs. It does not touch the premises inside which those outputs are generated. It is, in structural terms, a guardrail—a mechanism for keeping behavior within a defined corridor, without asking whether the corridor itself is oriented toward anything real.



Guardrails manage behavior within a system. They presuppose the legitimacy of the system they manage. They cannot evaluate whether the system as a whole is coherent with the conditions required for human flourishing, because that evaluation would require standing outside the system—on ground that alignment, by its own logic, cannot provide.

This is the **category error** that the renewal projects share with the administrative proceduralism they claim to critique. Both attempt to restore coherence at the level of behavior while leaving the ontological substrate untouched. Both treat the problem as one of coordination rather than constitution. Both mistake the guardrail for the foundation.

ILEE does not align. It constrains.

The distinction is not semantic. **Alignment asks:** *are the outputs of this system consistent with agreed-upon norms?* **Constraint asks:** *are the premises of this system coherent with the structural conditions required for human and planetary flourishing?* The first question can be answered within the system. The second cannot. It requires an external ontological reference point—a reality that stands independent of institutional will and imposes genuine limits on what systems may coherently do.

ILEE provides that reference point. Its evaluative criteria are not derived from consensus, preference, or negotiated alignment. They are derived from the ontological structure established by the Unified Philosophical System—the cascade that runs from ontology through epistemology and anthropology to ethics, in which nothing downstream may negate what it presupposes upstream. ILEE applies that cascade to institutional decisions, evaluating not whether they conform to current norms but whether they remain coherent with the conditions under which human beings can remain whole.

A distinction must be made here that is easy to miss and impossible to overstate.

The ontological ground from which ILEE derives its evaluative criteria is **not an axiom**. An axiom is an assumption—a starting point accepted without proof because proof must begin somewhere. Every system built on axioms inherits the fragility of its assumptions. Challenge the axiom, and the system above it becomes contestable. This is why every prior attempt to ground ethics secularly has remained vulnerable: it has assumed what it needed to demonstrate, and sophisticated critics have always been able to locate the assumption and decline to share it.

The IL UPS does not begin with assumptions. It begins with a **transcendental constraint**—a condition that cannot be denied without being presupposed in the act of denial. **Intelligibility** is not

assumed as a starting point. It is shown to be *the precondition of any starting point whatsoever*. Any attempt to question it, reject it, or argue against it already operates within it. The ground is not posited. It is identified as what must already be the case for any positing to occur.

This is the difference between building on bedrock and building on a foundation you have chosen to lay. Axiomatic systems can be questioned from outside. Transcendental constraints cannot—because there is no outside from which the questioning could proceed. The constraint is not one option among others. It is the condition under which options exist at all.

ILEE's evaluative authority derives from this. It does not ask whether you accept its premises. It demonstrates that you already operate within them—that any institutional decision, any policy, any system of governance already presupposes the conditions ILEE makes explicit. The question is not whether those conditions apply. They always apply. The question is whether the system in question is coherent with them or in violation of them.

Outputs that violate those conditions are not discouraged. They are not penalized after the fact. They are *structurally invalidated*—shown to be incoherent with the reality within which they claim to operate, regardless of their procedural correctness, their consensual legitimacy, or their short-term effectiveness by conventional measures.

This is the difference between a guardrail and a foundation. Guardrails manage behavior within a system. Foundations determine what systems are admissible. ILEE is a *foundation-level instrument*. It does not operate within the existing procedural order, adjusting its outputs at the margin. It evaluates whether the existing procedural order is itself coherent with the conditions that make any legitimate order possible.

Applied to law, this means that legal systems must be answerable not merely to their own procedural consistency but to the ontological conditions that give law its legitimacy—the recognition of persons as *meaning-bearing beings with inherent dignity*, the derivation of obligation from what human beings *are* rather than from what institutions have *chosen* to command.

Applied to economics, it means that monetary and credit architectures must be evaluated not merely for their internal efficiency but for their coherence with the generator functions of real value creation—their alignment with the conditions under which human productive contribution is recognized and rewarded rather than systematically displaced by leverage.

Applied to artificial intelligence, it means that optimization systems operating at civilizational scale must be constrained not merely by behavioral filters and alignment heuristics but by a prior evaluation of whether their premises remain coherent with the structural conditions required for human flourishing—a constraint that operates before optimization runs, not after its outputs have already propagated.

Applied to governance, it means that institutional authority must be answerable to a moral reality that stands independent of the institutions themselves—that procedure derives its legitimacy from ontology, not the reverse.

In each domain, the operative principle is the same. ILEE operationalizes the *krematai* structure—ensuring that institutional decisions remain bound to the vertical axis from which their legitimacy derives. The horizontal—law, economics, AI, governance, civic life—hangs on the vertical. ILEE is the mechanism that maintains the connection. It does not supply the vertical. The vertical is supplied by reality. ILEE ensures that institutions do not sever themselves from it and proceed as though the severance had no consequences.

The consequences, as this essay has traced them from Section I to here, are not ambiguous. They are the Exhausted Middle, the Synthetic Sinai, the Janus Coin, and the progressive replacement of truth by power in every domain of public life. ILEE does not prevent these consequences by managing behavior. It prevents them by maintaining the ontological ground from which coherent behavior derives.

That is not alignment. That is **constraint**. And constraint, at the foundation level, is what the renewal projects have been unable to offer—not because they lack intelligence or sincerity, but because they have not gone deep enough to find the ground on which a genuine offer could be made.

IX. Conclusion — The Ontological Choice

The choice before American civic life—before any civilization that has traveled this far down the road of ontological evacuation—is not the choice that is currently being offered.

It is not Left versus Right. It is not progressive versus conservative, proceduralist versus populist, institutionalist versus insurgent. Those are the choices available within the vacuum. They are the options generated by the Janus Coin—two faces of a single failure, each presenting itself as the solution to the problem the other represents, neither capable of providing what both lack.



The actual choice is between **ontological integrity** and **procedural simulation**.

Ontological integrity means the recovery of a shared account of reality sufficient to ground *genuine pluralism*—not metaphysical unanimity, which is neither possible nor necessary, but a non-negotiable floor below which no coherent civic life can operate, derived from first principles rather than negotiated among parties. It means allowing coherence to emerge from reality itself, rather than attempting to enforce it through administrative means. It means restoring the vertical axis—truth, being, moral order—from which the horizontal has always derived its force, and without which the horizontal always eventually collapses.

Procedural simulation means continuing what has been underway for generations: managing fragmentation through proceduralism, enforcing coherence through administration, multiplying rules to compensate for the absence of principles, expanding enforcement to substitute for the consent that shared reality once provided naturally. It means the Synthetic Sinai as a permanent condition—law without ontology, authority without metaphysical legitimacy, the Janus Coin spinning indefinitely between its two faces while the vacuum it conceals continues to deepen.

The renewal projects—Hunter’s Third Founding, the Miller Center’s appeal to the Exhausted Middle, the various institutional initiatives that share their logic—are choosing the second path while believing they are choosing the first. They are attempting to rebuild solidarity at the level of culture and behavior, which presupposes the continued existence of the ontological prior that has been evacuated. They are trying to reinhabit the horizontal while leaving the vertical empty. The *krematai* structure does not permit this. The horizontal hangs on the vertical. It cannot be reconstructed independently of it.

What Integral Liberty offers is not another proposal to be evaluated alongside the others. It is a demonstration—rigorous, eliminative, and available for sustained critical engagement—that the path to a genuine ontological floor exists.

The minimum claim is already decisive. Integral Liberty need not be the final word to change the terms of the debate. It demonstrates that a secular ontological floor is achievable—**that ethics can be derived from ontology through epistemology and anthropology without circularity, without infinite regress, and without theological premise**. Whether this system represents the definitive completion of that derivation will be determined by academic engagement over decades. What it has already shown, and what no serious engagement has yet refuted, is that the path *can be walked*.



It demonstrates that such a floor can host both sacred and secular traditions within genuine pluralism—with distinct, non-negotiable limits that are not negotiable precisely because they are not constructed. They are constraints imposed by reality on any system that claims to operate within it.

And it demonstrates, through the convergence of ILEE and JCHEE—two ethics engines derived from opposite epistemic directions, one purely secular-scientific, one purely theological, neither borrowing from the other—that this floor has already been independently located twice. The convergence is not a rhetorical flourish. It is the strongest available confirmation, short of formal proof, that both systems are tracking structural reality rather than expressing contingent tradition. This ground was not proposed. It was found. A proposal can be rejected. A finding must be engaged.

The optimized Venn—the largest possible space of coherent human habitation derivable from first principles—is not fantasy. It is the recognition of what independent derivation has already located. Everything smaller than this space is either coercion or dissolution: either the imposition of one tradition's metaphysics on those who do not share it, or the evacuation of metaphysics altogether and the power struggle that follows.

There is no stable middle position. The Exhausted Middle is exhausted precisely because it has been attempting to occupy a space that ontological evacuation has made uninhabitable. Solidarity is not a political project that can be recovered through better institutional design. It is an ontological achievement—the natural consequence of persons who share a common account of what they are, what reality requires of them, and what they owe to one another by virtue of that shared account. It cannot be produced by procedure. It can only be recognized, cultivated, and protected by institutions that remain accountable to the reality from which it derives.

You cannot have a public ethics that is not bound to a non-negotiable account of what is.

The *Integral Liberty Unified Philosophical System* provides the ground. The *Integral Liberty Ethics Engine* provides the constraint. *The Parables of Jesus* demonstrates, through the full corpus of Christ's teaching, that the same architecture has been independently disclosed from within the theological tradition—that the *krematai* structure is not a philosophical construction imposed on Scripture but a structural reality that Scripture, read correctly, has always contained.

Everything else is the management of a vacuum.



ENDNOTES

All cited essays are part of an ongoing unified body of work developing the Integral Liberty framework

Primary Corpus — Integral Liberty

1. Craig C. Shelton, *Integral Liberty, Volume I: The Civilizational Diagnosis* (Eudaimonia Press 2025).
2. Craig C. Shelton, *Integral Liberty, Volume II: The Architecture of a Whole Civilization* (Eudaimonia Press 2025).
3. Craig C. Shelton, *Integral Liberty, Volume III: The Architecture of a Free Civilization* (Eudaimonia Press 2025).
4. Craig C. Shelton, *Integral Liberty, Volume IV: The Logos Argument* (Eudaimonia Press 2026).

Related Work

5. Craig C. Shelton, *The Parables of Jesus* (Eudaimonia Press 2026).

Select Essays — Substack (Craig C. Shelton)

6. Craig C. Shelton, “A System Can Be Coherent and Still Be Wrong,” Substack, March 26, 2026.
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9. Craig C. Shelton, “Beyond Agrippa’s Trilemma — The Ontological Ground of Intelligibility,” Substack, March 21, 2026.
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14. Craig C. Shelton, “Why AI Requires an Ontological Constraint Layer,” Substack, March 16, 2026.
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18. Craig C. Shelton, “Is ‘War’ Still a Constitutional Category?” Substack, March 1, 2026.