

Get Off the Pendulum: The Trap of Reactionary Thinking

When I was younger, I used to enjoy riding Pharaoh's Fury at the Coastal Carolina fair. This big sphinx-headed boat swung back and forth on a mechanical arm, terrifying and thrilling the riders, and (in our imaginations) we thought about what it would be like if it went upside down – dumping us all out.

This ride is much like how most people and cultures do their thinking about values in politics, religion, and cultural norms. We swing in one direction, then another, then back again.

For a while one major viewpoint dominates. That viewpoint oppresses or annoys a strong minority until it eventually creates a strong reaction and a pendulum swing in the other direction. Cultural control comes into the hands of the new majority, which oppresses or annoys the new minority, and the cycle begins again.

You can see the pendulum in action in a society's relationship with religion: when religion dominates, secularists react (see the antitheist movement), and when secularism dominates, religionists react (see the fundamentalist movement). I'd argue that the intensity of both antitheism and fundamentalism are driven by feelings of disenfranchisement and oppression (and therefore more vulnerable to lazy thinking) rather than *just* differences of opinion.

You can especially see the pendulum in action on norms around gender roles and masculinity/femininity. For a long time, men (they still do in most cases) held and abused power over women. Fortunately for everyone, some women got pissed off and produced feminism. At some point, the swing toward feminine empowerment began to (at least appear to) correspond with a deemphasis of masculinity and a deconstruction of the important social role of males and masculinity. That has produced another swing in the direction of revived masculinity – some fantastic, but some unhealthy and unhealthily angry with feminism. In any case, if this reaction succeeds, it may only trigger another swing back in the other direction.

You can see the pendulum on a macro scale as well as in the micro scale of individual thinking. Everyone seems caught up in one reaction or another to the swinging of the belief pendulum. Perhaps you've gone through changes in your own beliefs. How often were you shifting your beliefs because of a sense of annoyance, or boredom, or anger, or contempt?

Of course, thinking on a pendulum is stupid. Thinking based on reaction and based on majority/minority belief status blinds you to complexity and to the actual merits of arguments.

And unfortunately, unlike a pendulum limited by Newton's laws, the pendulum of reactionary thought in politics and philosophy can continue to swing wider and further out with each cycle – until everyone falls out of the ride (to borrow the earlier metaphor).

There are alternatives.

If you use discernment, you'll watch to separate out your reasoned beliefs from your reactionary/emotional/tribal ones. When you do that, you'll be surprised how non-partisan and hard-to-categorize your beliefs become.

Maybe the left has good things to say about unjustly-acquired wealth. Maybe the right has good things to say about individual skill and responsibility in building wealth. Maybe the right answer includes and transcends (to borrow a phrase from Ken Wilber) both.

Maybe the feminists have good things to say about structural injustices toward women. Maybe the masculinists have something good to say about the importance of independent manhood.

Maybe the secularists can teach us something about being. Maybe the religionists can teach us something about the ground and sacredness of being.

When your beliefs can become this nuanced and non-tribal, you can be insulated from most of the worst effects of the social pendulum. But always watch out for what irritates you in others' beliefs and actions. The irritation will always be there, but you can't let it push you to change much in your values – or at all in the values that matter most.

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