What Do Left and Right Mean?
Guest: Daniel McCarthy
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WOODS: I had somebody make a request on my Facebook page the other day: can we get to the bottom, please, once and for all, of what Left and Right really mean? These days, Dan, especially among some libertarians, we hear a lot of people saying Left and Right are meaningless. The designation, if it ever meant anything, no longer holds.

I don't agree with that. I think the terms do mean something. They did mean something. They continue to mean something even if people on both sides, I think, sometimes try to confuse their own followers into thinking that they have disagreements with people on the other side just because they're on the other side. So I do think there are ways that the division can be misused, but clearly, Left does mean something and Right does mean something. If I say so-and-so is a leftist, I'm not just saying that person favors single-payer health care. That's a result of the root beliefs that person holds. So that's what I want to do today: get to the bottom of this. If so-and so-describes himself as a leftist, what is that person saying about himself fundamentally?

McCARTHY: Well, he's putting himself in a certain historical context. The idea of Left and Right, as a lot of people know, comes out of the French Revolution, where you had the National Assembly, which was the joint assembly of all the three estates, come together and abolish the old estates and then start debating how far the French Revolution was going to go. Were they going to get rid of the king? What are they going to do? Get rid of the Church? How far was it going to extend? And on the left side of the chamber you had the radicals who said, yes, we're going to have a more egalitarian France; we're going to have a more individualistic France. On the right you had people who tended to be defenders of the status quo, who believed in maintaining the class distinctions, maintaining the status of the Church, and maintaining the monarchy. So even though that seems like a very governmental kind of differentiation, in terms of the structure of the constitution of France in the 18th century, which seems like a really distant and far removed situation from our own, in fact I think there actually is a broader impact that that kind of framework has.

The impact it has is that it has to do with the nature of groups and social institutions in society. The Left has always been in favor of changing those relations, trying to even them out, trying to get rid of not only the legal privileges of old institutions, but even, I think, to get rid of their cultural privileges in the sense that they have some sort of unique function in society. The Right has always tended to defend older institutions and ways of life and has tried to say that no, actually, this is part of what it means to be a human being, simply to experience life in groups and in these organs of society, and it's certainly part of what it means to have a national life to be French or to be British, to be Americans, or what have you. So I think that's one of the key differences between Left and Right, but even though it has a historical origin, it also comes out as having certain ripple effects today.

WOODS: I think what follows from all of this is the distinction between Left and Right that has to do with the Left's confidence that it can take these old institutions, make them new, or abolish them, as the case may be, from the point of view of a disinterested observer, rationally imposing a plan on society. Whereas on the Right there is a tremendous skepticism of the ability of any planner to do this. From the Right's point of view, the institutions that we're talking about are natural to mankind and can't be uprooted and reassembled like a set of Tinkertoys. So you have on the one hand the leftist planner who thinks he's going to use his unaided reason as a guide for organizing society, whereas the person on the right hears the phrase "organizing society" and recoils.

McCARTHY: I think that's largely true, and in addition to that there's also an element of prophecy as well as planning. The Left historically has always envisioned itself as the party of the future and their idea of remaking society—by getting rid of the old institutions, you will necessarily just automatically create a better world, and the only things standing in the way of human progress are basically the chains of the past. On the Right, people who don't agree with that vision have always been much more skeptical of that. They think that regardless of how flawed our existing institutions may be, chances are they've come to exist for a reason, they've evolved for a reason. They can be reformed, certainly, but if you abolish them, you're not guaranteed to get a better result. Whereas the Left really does think that the future is simply to be achieved by demolishing the past.

WOODS: And I think the Right's view also is that it's a lot easier to undermine an institution than it is to build it back up again. If it turns out that the institution you're attacking is actually a lynchpin of civilized life, and now you've gone and ruined it, well, it may take a long time to build it back up again.

Now, if that's the Left's view, if they have this view that progress is synonymous with emancipation from the past, how could we ever get to a point that we're fully emancipated from the past? Is there a natural endpoint to what the Left is aiming at? Or is it just perpetual revolution—that every order that the Left establishes is then going to be undermined by the next generation of the Left?

McCARTHY: It actually does become perpetual revolution. From leftists throughout the past century and more—even Thomas Jefferson, who is someone who is a kind of mixed character in many ways, does have this sort of republican devotion and a devotion to a Whig ideal that makes him less than a complete leftist, but even Thomas Jefferson believes that every generation the Constitution should be ripped up and started anew, completely afresh. And certainly in the 20th century one saw real leftists go to enormous extremes. The Cultural Revolution in China, for example, was precisely an attempt to say we've already had a Chinese revolution, we've already put the Communist Party in power, but that's not enough. And now the Communist Party is slightly conservative. It's slightly less radical than it was at the beginning. So we're going to destroy society once more in order to create a more radical Chinese revolution 2.0. And I think the Left fundamentally has a tendency—has no limits. It doesn't place any kind of bounds on its desire to constantly drive for utopia by destroying the present and destroying actually existing human life.

WOODS: Now, even though you're the editor of *The American Conservative*, you're of course interested in libertarianism. You're interested in more or less all branches of political thought, as I am. So I'd like to know: how do you think Left and Right do or do not apply to libertarianism? Somebody like Walter Block says they do not apply at all; libertarianism is neither Left nor Right. Some people say it borrows a little from the Left, it borrows a little bit from the Right. Some people say it's just Left or it's just Right. Do you have an opinion?

McCARTHY: Yeah, I would say two things. Based on the discussion we've been having, you see that a lot of it comes down to your attitudes toward existing habits and institutions. If you are a cultural revolutionary it doesn't mean necessarily that you want to use state power to destroy the 501-c3 non-profit status of churches or something like that, but even if you are someone who just on a cultural level doesn't like some of the more Christian cultural heritage that the country has or the old ways of doing things, then that might put you on the Left in some regards. So that can create a Left/Right split among libertarians just in terms of their cultural preferences, even if in terms of their preferences about government action or non-action rather, all libertarians might have a degree of agreement.

I think there's also a second and more complex dimension to libertarianism and the Left and the Right, which is this: when the Left/Right spectrum started with the French Revolution, it really did make sense for libertarians, or people who were sort of prototype libertarian, to consider themselves as being somewhat on the Left, because the whole idea was to get rid of a lot of these institutions of privilege, and they really did [include] legal privilege, not just cultural privilege, and certainly aristocracy has legal privileges. Established churches: that's not freedom of religion. That's a certain religion having advantages that others do not and receiving tax revenue from everyone and so forth. So libertarians at the original time of the Left/Right distinction, would have had good reason to consider themselves as being on the Left. The problem is that, of course, that's not where the Left, which does have the tendency towards perpetual revolution, that's not where the Left stays. The Left then said, well, it's not enough

just to have the end of legal privilege. We're going to have to go to changing the entire nature of society, and that's going to require actually using state power in order to transform human life. So I think that's how libertarians get confused. Yes, it's true. They started out on the Left, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they should see themselves as being on the Left today, when the Left has been redefined by much more aggressive institutions, much more aggressive mentalities that use state power to change all of society.

WOODS: I can imagine also a person of conservative temperament thinking that the libertarian insistence on property is a barrier against revolution, and so they think of libertarianism then as a way of thinking that actually yields you stability in the long run because it establishes private property. It establishes boundaries that you can't pass, you can't trespass on. Likewise, I can certainly imagine people of conservative temperament feeling like: given that the Left is committed to ongoing revolution, and usually that ongoing revolution involves attacks on things that I cherish, rather than holding out the vain hope that perhaps someday I will elect decent people who will protect me from the Left, maybe the best thing to do is to try not to play this game at all and instead try to carve out a little community where I could live out my values. If people in San Francisco want to live out their values, that's their business. You come to a kind of a realization that there is a finite expectation that we can have about what's possible in this world in terms of establishing the kind of society we want, and maybe we can establish it only on a small scale. I have my small-scale community, you have your small-scale community. There is something conservative about that way of thinking, and yet it has libertarian implications.

McCARTHY: I tend to agree with that. I think federalism is something that really gets rid of the Left/Right spectrum in a very good and healthful way, and in fact, one of the things that's interesting about the Left/Right spectrum is that the people on the Right, the more conservative elements going all the way back to the French National Assembly, tended to reject the idea of the spectrum. They said, okay, we may have our differences, but we still have one kind of culture and society, and it has its own internal structure and hierarchy and differentiations. With the United States, certainly, that internal structure has been a federalist structure, which has left local communities and states a large amount of freedom to set their own agenda. So certainly there is a way of transcending the Left/Right spectrum and creating a higher kind of unity by getting away from this idea that we have to have a minute way of life dictated to everyone, and that you could, in fact, have sort of diversity and unity. You can have *e pluribus unum*.

WOODS: Dan, you might be interested that I had Kirkpatrick Sale on the program last week. He's sort of an odd duck in a good way, in that if you had to classify him, he would belong among the Progressives on some level, given when you look at his books, you look at his history in the '60s, and yet he insists that he hasn't changed at all in supporting secession and devolution of power because he sees that as the way of instantiating participatory democracy that he was advocating in the 1960s. But he acknowledges that his is very much a minority

position on the Left. He doesn't like the Left/Right spectrum, either, but you have to call people something, and on the Left there is so much of a desire to engage in that planning, to get that clipboard out and to force society to conform to your model; that desire doesn't seem to stop at the border of an American state. They want to impose it on the whole country. So it would be nice to say we can transcend the Left/Right spectrum by saying, look, you Vermonters can do your thing, and then people in some other state can do their thing, but in actual practice I find people on the Left are not willing to accept that. Certainly there are some people on the Right who aren't willing to accept it, either; I don't think Mike Huckabee would accept that, either.

McCARTHY: Well, and as you say, someone like Kirkpatrick Sale considers himself to be on the Left, and he is willing to endorse the federalist and highly devolved political system.

So I don't think that Left/Right necessarily adheres to an anti-centralist perspective. I think clearly the Left does have universalistic ambitions, which tend to be stronger than the universalistic ambitions of the Right. But there are a lot of left-wingers who are also—they do have a tradition of their own, I should say, of decentralism. So I do see some grounds for saying that what I want to avoid there, actually, is a confusion where everyone just automatically assumes that if someone like Kirkpatrick Sale identifies himself as being on the Left, it necessarily means that he wants to centralize power, because of course that's not correct with Kirkpatrick Sale, and it may not be correct with some other people, either. So this is one of the reasons and one of the ways in which I think the Left/Right spectrum actually confuses people. So even though it does have meaning, it shouldn't be taken as signifying a lot of concrete, particular policies and points of view. It's a general tendency and a general attitude towards institutions and towards ways of life, and I think people confuse themselves in that they put too much content in it and just project too much, too many specifics, into what it means when someone identifies as Left and Right.

WOODS: Well, certainly on the localism question we can see how people who have different points of view in terms of what way of life they'd like to follow can agree to disagree: I'll do this, and you'll do that, and we'll leave each other alone. But there are other ways, too, that we've seen Left and Right if not become friendly, then at least in some cases, as we've seen with Ralph Nader's recent book, figure out ways to work with each other on certain things. Now, given the way we've been describing Left and Right, that would almost seem impossible, because they're engaged in such radically different projects. How can it be that there are circumstances in which the revolutionists, so to speak, and those who would conserve the past can yet somehow work together on something? Could the U.S. government be so perverse that it could bring these groups together?

McCARTHY: That's a great question. In some cases, I look at someone like Ralph Nader, and I see someone who's actually temperamentally very conservative, even though his views on the economy, for example, would not place him among—certainly not among libertarians and really not among most conservatives, either. But Ralph Nader doesn't strike me as someone

who is driven to upending society. The thing is, too, the way our federal government works—the way that state power in general works—is it does tend to try to reshape society in its own image in both directions, even though the Left, I think, has a natural affinity for using state power to try to remake human life and try to remake all values and institutions.

The fact is, the state is very happy to continue to grow if right-wing values are put into it, and are used to try to reshape a society also. So even crony capitalist values, right? So Ralph Nader, and some of his criticisms, for example, of commercialism in the public schools have actually found support from conservatives—Christian conservatives, for example, because they see that you've got a captive audience. You have public school children who are then being force fed, basically, a commercial radio service on their school bus. And you can see why both Christian conservatives and Ralph Nader would see that there's something problematic here, that you have a combination of state power and private profit that really creates some perverse incentives. So, yeah, the amount of power and meddling that the state gets up to really does create these strange bedfellows.

WOODS: All right, let's bring in the neoconservatives. No conversation with Dan McCarthy, from my point of view, is complete without mentioning the neoconservatives. Just to get their dander up, I'll sometimes insinuate that there is a strain of leftism in the neoconservative outlook. But I'm not just doing that just to bother them. I'm doing it to get them to think. Because they claim to be anti-leftist. After all, they're neo*conservative*, right? They're supposed to be conserving something. And yet there is running through neoconservatism—which comes in numerous varieties, to be sure, and you can find it in some people more abundantly and clearly than in others—a thread of leftist universalism. Do you see that? And if so, where is it and what is it?

McCARTHY: Well, it certainly exists in foreign policy, where the neocons pretty much explicitly are in favor of worldwide, global democratic revolution. What that actually means is destroying existing political regimes, destroying the existing states. What we see happening, as has been in the case of Iraq, is when you do that you actually unleash chaos. You unleash just rampant violence and civil war. But revolutionaries see that as being basically no bad thing, right? You've got to break a lot of eggs in order to make an omelet. So I think the neocons are not terribly embarrassed by what their own war, which first of all deposed Saddam Hussein and then led to this ongoing slow-motion and now fast-forwarded civil war in Iraq, and of course, also Syria now, I think the neocons are unembarrassed by that. I think they see this as part of what they were trying to do. Obviously, they would have been happier if things had gone directly from revolution to a sort of American-style liberal democracy, but I think they still think it's worth it to have this absolute bloodshed in order to get some sort of imaginary utopian future at the end, and that's a purely far Left, revolutionary perspective. Bret Stephens, one of these neocons who is very prominent on the Hill, he had an interview just earlier this week in I think the University of Chicago alumni magazine saying that, oh yeah, he was totally comfortable with his decision to support the Iraq war. There were a few neocons—strangely enough, David

Frum, of all people, has actually expressed some doubts about the Iraq war in retrospect. There are a few neocons who really do seem a little bit troubled by what their policies have achieved, but for the most part, they are totally in favor of destroying bad but livable existing circumstances in order to create what they hoped were utopian circumstances that actually turned out to be even worse and unlivable circumstances than the present.

WOODS: In other words, where's my omelet? You broke all the eggs. Where's the omelet? We never seem to get the omelet. It's funny, by the way, that you mentioned David Frum, because I very often cite his book *An End to Evil*, as exactly what it is I'm talking about with the neoconservatives that. Could you imagine Russell Kirk writing a book called *An End to Evil*? He would think this must be some leftist tract or something. *An End to Evil*? What are you talking about? *An End to Evil* on this Earth, in this life, with these human beings, you're telling me you're going to bring about an end to evil. Now, granted, you give people a little poetic license when it comes to a book title, but I'm pretty sure Russell Kirk would have died a thousand deaths before agreeing to title like that.

But then also, even on the domestic front, if I read somebody like David Brooks or any of these neocons who posture as conservatives in the mainstream—because the neocons are as far as the mainstream will generally go in admitting the existence of conservatives—in a presidential cycle they'll say things like, "We need somebody who's ready to govern." That phrase, I don't know about you, Dan, but I find that incredibly creepy—"ready to govern." What does that—ready to what? To boss people around? To tell people what to do? To change people's lives in all kinds of undesirable ways? What does that mean, "ready to govern"? They have a policy-wonkish approach to the domestic sphere. My own view, which I'll concede to you may be an extreme one, is that the very idea of "public policy" is borderline leftist in and of itself, because it again amounts to the substitution for what people would prefer to see happen of a plan managed by school of government Ph.D.s.

McCARTHY: Well, let me go back to your point about *An End to Evil* because I think that actually gets at something fundamental that scholars like Claes Ryn, for example, have discussed, and that is that the Left tends to have this view of evil as being something external. It's either in our institutions or it's in other countries, and therefore it's something that can be destroyed. You just abolish religion, or you go and you invade another country and destroy its government, and that is creating an end to evil. Whereas the more classical view, which you find both in Greek and Roman literature and also in the Christian tradition and basically almost all religious traditions, is the view that evil is something that you can never get rid of because it's partly intrinsic, and you not only have to fight evil that's outside of yourself, but you also have to fight the tendency towards hubris and the tendency towards pride and the tendency towards self-aggrandizement and grasping for power that is intrinsic within all human beings to one degree or another.

So I think that's a fundamental difference in a view of human nature between the Left and the Right. And the Left really does have the sense that evil is something that just exists somewhere

else in the world to simply be destroyed by heavy weaponry. As far public policy goes, I don't know that I agree with you there, because even in the most traditional kind of political order, you obviously do have public institutions. You do have institutions of government of one kind or another, which have pursued policies, and those policies—I don't see that the word public policy itself necessarily indicates policies are policies that overreach their proper sphere, but certainly when the Left talks about public policy and the neocons do, they do have a tendency to want someone who kind of has a grand plan and makes everyone feel like part of an army on the march, so to speak, and that's something that conservatives and libertarians alike have to look at with a great deal of skepticism.

WOODS: Your point about evil being external reminds me of the various utopians that you can find in American society from about the 1820s to the 1850s, and they did exactly that. Some of them would say the one thing holding us back from the great society, so to speak, is private property. You had utopian communities set up to live without private property, and none of them lasted longer than two years. Or it was alcohol. Alcohol is the source of our problems, and it leads to family breakup and crime and poverty and so on. I'm not defending alcoholism, obviously, but again, this is the key thing: we get rid of this, we solve our problems. Or then it became ignorance. Ignorance is our problem. One of the great—great in the just the historical sense—educational reformers in the 19th century said that we would get rid of 90% of crime if we could have universal, compulsory education. Or the family. There were the folks in the Oneida settlement under John Humphrey Noyes, and their view was that the family was a problem because monogamous marriage led to all kinds of rivalries—my wife is prettier than your wife, and you can't have access to her. Only I can. And so one after another they would try and topple one of these institutions, thinking that that was the locus of evil. So you are exactly right. Again, if you compare that to Kirk or Edmund Burke, or any of these classical conservatives, they would think this is nutball. That's not where evil is ultimately to be found. All right, I am going to leave you with—

MCCARTHY: I just want to jump in, actually, with two points you brought up, because I think they are very important, and they tend to get overlooked. Prohibition, as you know, and the whole idea of a hardcore temperance movement, not just a kind of social movement to get people to drink less, but an attempt to actually really restrict alcohol sales, was always seen as being a progressive and a left-wing effort, even though it was often promulgated by people who in their personal lives were very Christian and very conservative in some respects, precisely because it had that externalization of evil and this sort of utopian goal—this idea that if only we got rid of this external problem, it would lead to a suddenly virtuous life. When, in fact, a virtuous life is a matter of an internal struggle and battling your own tendency towards sin. It's not about simply blaming a substance for all of your problems. And obviously, a substance can contribute to other flaws that you have, but it's obviously not the cause of evil in the world. So you're exactly right. And not only is that true of Prohibition as it existed in the past, but it's also true of the drug war today. In fact, if you just look at the rhetoric of people who consider themselves conservative Republicans, when they talk about their support for the

drug war it looks very utopian. It looks very much leftist in its idea that evil is a purely external force.

But the other thing we should probably talk about just for a few minutes here, though, is property, because you did point out quite correctly that property is something that because it has a certain element of stability to it, can be a great bulwark against revolution—a great bulwark against bad changes. But I think one thing that traditionalist conservatives and libertarians disagree on here is libertarians tend to place an increasing emphasis on property over time, I think. Whereas traditionalist conservatives say everything doesn't reduce to property and everything doesn't reduce to individual rights, and that in fact, there is a somewhat left-wing, faintly left-wing element in trying to change society so that those elements are stronger than other elements. So for example, with something like divorce, conservatives tended to be very critical of the idea of no-fault divorce and saying this is just an individual contract; you can negate it at any time. Whereas I think libertarians have a tendency to say, well, on a purely individualist basis freely contracting individuals should not be bound by any other social pressures or [inaudible] restrictions.

WOODS: Yeah, that is a key point, and that is another key area of differentiation, but that opens up so many other topics. The issue of the family is very interesting, because I think in part—well, not just in part: I think by and large libertarians have done a really lousy job of theorizing about the family. I think the family, which is not a small thing, has actually been a huge stumbling block for a lot of libertarians because they are insisting on taking their view of government and the reasons they are unhappy with government and trying to force that into why they are unhappy with the family as it's traditionally understood or as it exists in law. That's certainly not a view that I take. For example, Walter Block has had a really, really interesting back-and-forth about parents and children with a much lesser known, but very significant figure, Jakub Wisniewski. Wisniewski is as Rothbardian as can be, but he still is able to come out with arguments in favor of positive obligations that parents have. It's not merely negative obligations: don't kill your kid with an axe. He's able to show that you can derive positive obligations. So there's much more that needs to be done, certainly, in that area.

Before I let you go, Dan, I know you've done this in the past, but if people are like me, they have short memories. Give people a quick pitch for what *The American Conservative* is all about. The website is TheAmericanConservative.com.

MCCARTHY: Well, *The American Conservative* is a magazine of realist conservatism—reality-based conservatism—which was much mocked by the Bush Administration 10 years ago, but we stand here as conservatives that see America as having limits to its foreign policy and limits to these utopian ambitions that we've been discussing in this podcast. So the website is TheAmericanConservative.com. The magazine is produced on a bi-monthly basis, and it has some of the most brilliant writers you can imagine. Not only is Tom Woods one of our contributing editors, but a number of guests on your show, such as Bill Kauffman, are putting

regular appearances in our pages. So I highly recommend our magazine to everyone who enjoys the Tom Woods podcast.

WOODS: Well, thanks again, Dan, I appreciate your time—interesting conversation. More interesting even, I bet, if we had had a few drinks. Maybe we should experiment with that next time I have you on.

MCCARTHY: (laughs) Quite so. Thanks, Tom.

WOODS: Thank you, Dan.