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The Conservative Heart: How to Build a Fairer, Happier, and More Prosperous America

Arthur C. Brooks

New York: Broadside Books, 2015, 246 pp.

Conservatives and libertarians have the answers for many of America’s problems today, says Arthur Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), especially the problems of poverty. So why is our message so unpopular with so many? It’s because, Brooks argues, we lead with our heads, not with our hearts—we do a terrible job packaging our message. He’s right. We need to take people as they are, not as the purely rational creatures we’d like them to be.

After tracing his own idiosyncratic odyssey before he reached AEI—among other things, a college dropout, an itinerant French hornist with the City Orchestra of Barcelona, and a chaired Syracuse University professor of economics—Brooks begins his argument by noting the paradox his travels have brought before him: In recent decades the free market has lifted millions out of poverty in the developing world, yet poverty persists in America despite a half-century War on Poverty. Worse still, since the Great Recession, even the American middle class feels left behind.

So with the failure of the liberal solutions that have dominated our politics for decades, Brooks asks: “Why aren’t Americans turning to conservatives for better solutions? Simple: People don’t think conservatives care.” And he has the polls to prove it.

In fact, this book is rich with social science data supporting his central thesis, that if we want to start winning—especially for the poor, the book’s particular focus—we’ve got to learn to speak in a way that persuades rather than turns off so many. And Brooks follows his own advice, offering up a wealth of *stories* about programs that succeed and those that don’t. Our sprawling entitlement programs, he writes, have succeeded only in making poverty marginally less painful, not less permanent: since the time the Great Society’s major policy pillars were put in place, the poverty rate had dropped by only 0.2 percent—a rounding error. But when we look to an array of private sector programs, we find the Doe Fund’s Harlem Center for Opportunity, for example, established by a husband and wife team dedicated to helping the most difficult cases, homeless ex-cons, get back on their feet through a sustained program dedicated to instilling the dignity of work. Since 1990, the program has helped more than 22,000 people reclaim their lives.

But what’s important to notice about the Doe Fund’s success is that it’s based on four *moral* principles. As Brooks describes them: People are assets, not liabilities; work is a blessing, not a punishment; values matter most in lifting people up; and help is important, but hope is essential. You don’t get that from a welfare check.

There is, in short, a better way to fight poverty. But it begins, Brookes concludes, with learning how to talk about “a conservative social justice agenda” in a way in which Americans will listen—or at least the “persuadables,” people who aren’t necessarily political but are open to practical solutions rooted in broadly held values. And that begins with a simple admonition: “Be a moralist.”

By way of example, Brooks uses the debate over raising the minimum wage. Progressive proponents go straight to moral arguments: The billionaires who own Wal-Mart, they contend, can afford to pay a few more dollars per hour to help struggling families. While a libertarian might urge simply getting rid of the minimum wage, even a less confrontational conservative would often begin with a lecture about pricing cheap labor out of the market. Which side, Brooks asks, comes across like it has the workers’ best interests at heart? Better it would be, he believes, to begin by saying that our society should make sure that people can support themselves and their families, so the real question is: “What is the best way to make work pay for folks at the bottom of the economic ladder?” Then point out that a

minimum wage hike would actually set back that goal. Finally, home in on the moral closer: “Increasing the minimum wage would give some people raises, but many of the most vulnerable would lose their jobs! We need to fight for those people.”

But Brooks wouldn’t even stop there. He would add this: “I have a better way to make work pay. Instead of raising the minimum wage, we should expand the Earned Income Tax Credit [EITC]. This supplements poor people’s paychecks without destroying their jobs. Poor Americans need and deserve this.” His focus is thus on work—and, more important, on the dignity of work, and on helping the young, especially, to get that first job and all the life-skills that go with it.

With his appeal to the EITC, therefore, Brooks is not a pure libertarian, whatever that means. He’d sooner see people with jobs, supplemented by public funds, than see them jobless but with a bigger welfare check. He would because his vision is driven by what he calls the “happiness portfolio,” the four values that are most correlated with the subject to which he has devoted much of his professional work—that is, happiness: faith, family, community, and meaningful work. Indeed, the value of work and the values work engenders run throughout this book.

Not surprisingly, the book leaves a number of issues unresolved. Taking not only people as they are but society today as it is, Brooks would not undo the social safety net, for example, citing no less than Hayek and Reagan for that, though he would redo substantial parts of it, like Obamacare. In so holding, he seems a bit too quick to say that voluntary charity cannot do the job, even if he does add, again citing Hayek and Reagan, that “a real social safety net is one of the great achievements of our free market system.” Then again, he proposes relocation vouchers to help the long-term unemployed; like the countless government job-training programs we see today, such proposals have a way of taking on a life of their own. More generally, distinguishing the truly from the less needy has ever been a problem—and more so when it’s the responsibility of government.

But Brooks does not set out to solve every problem. The one on which he does focus, our too often self-defeating rhetoric, is worth our attention.

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