

How to Rebel

Kirstin Anderson Birkhaug¹

¹ Political Science, Hope College

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This article is an adaptation of the Acton Institute's 2025 Calihan Lecture, presented by Novak Award winner Kirstin Anderson Birkhaug. Drawing on C. S. Lewis and Albert Camus, Birkhaug argues that contemporary American politic culture suffers from a shortage of true rebels—those who pursue truth instead of embracing ideology, are devoted to real people instead of abstraction, and are willing to labor for incremental change and long-term benefit rather than immediate gratification.

In this fraught political moment, if there is one thing Americans have in common, it is the sense that things are bad, or have been bad, or stand to get worse. All those sentiments may, in fact, be true, but Americans should not settle for vague feelings of unsettledness, when there are perfectly reasonable explanations as to why American politics are so bad right now.

American politics are bad because they are predictable. Even in this “unprecedented” moment, one is unlikely to find oneself surprised by the actions of particular political figures, bodies, and groups. Instead, it seems that Americans can see “unprecedented” political moments coming down the tracks long before they happen. Quantitative political scientists make a living on predicting what will happen next in American politics given what has already happened; this is possible only because there is so much evidence that our political patterns repeat themselves. Polarization begets more polarization. Inflamed rhetoric begets similarly inflamed rhetoric. Neglected voters on one side of the political spectrum take their revenge on the political order that scorned them; new voters become neglected and angry. None of this is in any way surprising; in fact, American politics feel like a never-ending revenge cycle of escalating bad behavior. In this, American politics are not only bad, but supremely boring.

American politics are bad because they are superficial. One finds no shortage of strong political opinions among Americans, but these opinions are derived mostly from passing thoughts and feelings. The idea that seriously considered moral and ethical commitments should drive American politics feels quaint. Absent from American politics are the bedrock questions of first principles: What is

good? How do we live together? Is perfection possible; or, if not perfection, improvement? Appetites for outrage and sensation, directed toward intractable political events over which individuals have no real control, dull sensibilities regarding real relationships, the needs of communities, and the duties to be done in work, homes, churches, and neighborhoods. When it comes to politics, Americans miss the forest for the trees; they skim the surface, they pluck the low-hanging fruit. At the same time, Americans welcome distraction from the very things that should command their attention: the people around them, and the big questions of human life and community.

American politics are bad because they are narrow. American politics allow for no expansiveness of mind; within the zeitgeist, people categorize themselves in opposition to each other on principle, such that all reservations are left to the side for the sake of winning elections. Americans wear their politics as personality traits, each bending the knee to whichever ideological movement will make them *feel* the most important. Americans consume with abandon the proclamations and decrees of whatever authorities exist within their ideological circles—whatever “experts” their ideologies instruct them to believe without question. The countless hours Americans spend down algorithmic rabbit holes, consuming targeted political content meant to affirm their idiosyncratic preferences, exacerbate the problem. American politics make Americans small.

These aspects of American politics are disconnected from reality. Human life, and indeed American life, is varied, and exciting, and unpredictable; it is deep and wide and invites important questions; it is bigger than individuals. Americans have become tacitly agnostic to reality by accepting a politics that exists outside them. The theologian Michael Novak warned that “the most critical threat to our freedom is a failure to appreciate the power of truth,” and indeed, American politics reveal the prescience of his warning.¹ What exists now in America is not the politics of a free people, but a people on their knees.

American politics are bad, but problems of culture do not and cannot extend beyond the people in whom that culture consists. If a people can change, politics will follow. Such cultural change will require great effort. It will require that

1 Quoted in Farah Dally, *The Magic of Truth: A Reality to Remember* (Hamilton Books, 2015), x.

individuals actively choose what is now a countercultural and little-trodden way of thinking, in opposition to every incentive and invitation to political discourse that currently exists. To wit: Our politics desperately need rebels.

This is not to say that anyone needs more folks willing to glue themselves to famous works of art, or storm the Bastille, or learn how to make Molotov cocktails. American politics have too many of these, and, at any rate, this is not what real rebellion looks like. To understand how to rebel requires first an understanding of what the rebel must be *for*, because, contra James Dean, there is no such thing as a rebel without a cause. Second, the rebel needs to know what rebellion itself requires, and how these requirements shape what rebellion can do. Such an examination requires guides. To the first object—what the rebel is for—there is C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*.² To the second object—the requirements of rebellion—there is Albert Camus, and his appropriately titled work, *The Rebel*.³

Lewis and Camus experienced firsthand the events and modes of thought that have shaped the twenty-first century. Both wrote against the backdrop of a war-torn and tumultuous mid-century Europe, and recorded the destruction wrought by ideological politics. Contemporary readers and thinkers often treat the word *ideology* as a neutral term. Ideologies are not something those in the contemporary world discourage or avoid. Developing an ideology, to the contemporary person, might be akin to developing a political point of view. Everyone knows ideologies when they see them, or when they apply them as labels to themselves or others—progressive, conservative, libertarian—and these ideologies give people some kind of helpful heuristic for navigating the world. It allows one to prestidigitate coherence onto a chaotic and complicated world.

Lewis and Camus challenge contemporary politics, then, because both of them viewed ideology as an insidious evil rather than a neutral tool for categorization. Lewis and Camus both surveyed the great desecration of human life in the mid-twentieth century—the genocide of Jewish people, a generation of young men killed, or wounded, or forever damaged, the brutality of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia both at home and abroad—and laid it all squarely at the feet of ideology. For them, ideology was new, and represented

2 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (HarperCollins, 2001). All quotations are taken from this edition.

3 Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Vintage, 1991). All quotations are taken from this edition.

a complete, top-to-bottom shift in political disposition. Ideological thinking resulted from the “sciencification” of political philosophy, which culminated in the early to mid-twentieth century. Prior to this moment, most theories of politics agreed that people constituted politics, and that people could not be counted on to be good, even given the best attempts of teachers and laws to make them good. Most political thinkers prior to this period held that only marginal political progress was possible—and only if people stayed within existing guardrails like religion, custom, and tradition. These thinkers did not believe that politics could be perfected, only that they could be improved upon.

In the contemporary era, however, new political philosophies insisted politics could be perfected, brought to total unity and the complete absence of conflict, and that such perfection required only correct formulations of politics. From this origin sprung all the well-known “isms” that persist to this day: communism, socialism, fascism, authoritarianism. The underlying assumption of ideological politics is that humans can perfect themselves through systems. If only a nation institutes the “correct” authority structures, or enforces the “proper” sharing of resources, or limits citizenship to only the “right” ethnic groups, all its political problems will be solved. This “scientific” ideological thinking undergirded the French Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Third Reich—all movements that sought to reshuffle existing social and political orders and institute new “sciences” of politics that would achieve particular ideals. As T. S. Eliot wrote, these ideologues spent their time “dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”⁴

C. S. Lewis examined the phenomenon of ideological thinking in “The Way,” the second essay of *The Abolition of Man*. In it, Lewis articulated its central fallacies, and offered another way, *the way* of thinking that can provide an antidote. In a world defined by ideology, this essay offers those who would rebel a clear sense not only of what they ought to rebel against but what they ought to fight for.

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis critiqued the intellectual trajectory of the West, describing in his first essay that the preeminence of the rational in education, to the neglect of spirit and soul, had yielded a generation of “men without chests” who did not know how to feel rightly. In the second essay, Lewis made note

4 T. S. Eliot, *The Rock: A Pageant Play* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), 42.

of a tendency among the modern intelligentsia to consider traditional modes of morality with skepticism, and to engage in a “cutting away” of the “parasitic growth of emotion, religious sanction, and inherited taboos, in order that the ‘real’ or ‘basic’ values may emerge.” Real human values, for these “Innovators,” as Lewis called them, are to be found somewhere deep in the human psyche, or else in an imagined state of nature, where the *tabula rasa* human still resides, unpolluted by the likes of history, religion, and tradition. In working to get at values this way, Lewis observed that the Innovators always run up against the same obstacle: the question of value itself.

Take, for example, an act of self-sacrifice. To those who retain some semblance of traditional value, to sacrifice oneself for others might be called noble, or just, or even heroic. This is because nobility, justice, and heroism are not merely products of individual human rationality but exist within the context of a human tradition that conceives of these things not only in the head, but in the chest. For the Innovators, though, who wish to reject history, tradition, and feeling as sources of value, nobility, justice, and heroism do not explain why someone might choose to sacrifice himself for others. If reason is the source of all value, then Innovators must explain why one might *rationally* sacrifice himself. A tall order, since to put oneself in harm’s way is a quintessentially irrational act. So why, then, might a rational person sacrifice himself for others? The Innovator cannot go much further than utility—that self-sacrifice only makes rational sense when considering a person’s usefulness in juxtaposition to the usefulness of others. The Innovators’ idea of rational self-sacrifice for others is merely *attestuppa*: Those who are beyond their usefulness to the community exit, stage left, or rather, off cliff, as a benefit to those who are more useful than they. There is a cold rationality in this self-sacrifice; the Innovators would say it is perfectly logical. They cannot make sense, however, of Sophocles’s Antigone accepting the punishment of death to secure funeral rites for her perished brother—after all, Polynices is already dead. Christ on the cross also presents a dilemma for the Innovators—isn’t God much more useful than every human life combined? That one would sacrifice oneself for one less useful than oneself out of love, or a sense of duty, or to satisfy the requirements of justice, is foreign to the Innovator, because these values cannot be established in the mind, but arise at least in part from the chest.

The problem with the Innovators’ mission, for Lewis, is that an individual cannot reproduce from his own rationality the generations of inherited wisdom that comprise the core of what humans recognize as “good.” Lewis argued that this

core of values cuts across time and place to unite all of humankind, recognizable in the *Tao* of eastern philosophy (which Lewis used as the namesake for this value system), the Hindu *Rta*, the Bible, and in many of the great pagan and secular philosophers.

For Lewis, the Tao is transcendent truth. Humans cannot know the Tao in its entirety, but our partial knowledge of it (which expands and contracts in different times and places) represents all of our best attempts to get at goodness. The Tao is, he wrote, “not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. . . . There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgement of value in the history of the world.” In other words: Truth exists, and we cannot exist outside of it. While the Tao consists in part of a grand tradition of time-honored practical human morality, it also hearkens to the big, capital-T truth from which all things take their being. Lewis, the great Christian thinker, believed that this truth was God. But, in this essay, Lewis left things in more secular terms. While mileage might vary on religious principles, people ought to agree that truth exists, and that their ancestors made some progress in understanding some parts of it, even if they saw it only through a glass, darkly. The Tao does not depend on one ideal, but is the full collection and cumulation of all possible ideals, which must be held together or not at all. The Tao instructs, for example, both parents and progeny in duty; one party’s dereliction is a rejection of the whole system of familial responsibility. To be within the Tao means to recognize that children matter *and* parents matter. Freedom matters *and* equality matters. Choice matters *and* virtue matters. History matters *and* progress matters. I matter *and* you matter. The great error of the Innovators, who believed they could use reason to invent new systems of morality outside the Tao, is that these systems cannot hold together all the ideals that the Tao contains at once. These “innovative” systems of value are ideological systems that pick and choose which values are important. One ideology holds that liberty and equality are all that matter. Another ideology holds that dogmatic respect for tradition is all that matters. While none of these ideals are bad, *per se*, they are not good in and of themselves. They are parts of the Tao, not the whole. Any attempt to build a system of value around these ideals amounts to an attempt to break off a piece of the Tao and make it the whole; to simplify the vast and varied nature of ultimate truth into something that the individual human mind can conjure on its own.

Ideological systems of value ultimately fail because, as Lewis writes, “The [revolution] of new ideologies against the Tao is a [revolution] of the branches against the tree: if the [revolutionaries] could succeed they would find that they had destroyed themselves. The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary color, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in.” The Innovators lack the humility to recognize the limits of their own understanding, and the wonder to appreciate that which cannot be known rationally. They view the human mind and will as essentially unlimited, and refuse to be restrained by ideas of what “ought” to be done as opposed to what “can” be done. The Innovators fail to recognize what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author and Soviet dissident, noted in his book *Gulag Archipelago*:

The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. . . . And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains an unuprooted small corner of evil.⁵

The Innovators never peek into that small corner of evil that resists eradication in even the best of human hearts. They are utopians who fail to remember that *utopia* literally means “no place.” Their ideological systems of value rest on the assumption that the human mind can produce pure ideals, and that humans can purify themselves in the pursuit of these ideals. Lewis recognized the obvious: that humans are not pure, and that from the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made. Humans are at their worst when they lean on their own understanding, and as such ought to seek counsel from those who have gone before them, knowing all the while that the human understanding of truth is always partial, always in progress, always on the way. A life within the Tao is far from a life of certainty—in fact, acknowledging that humans are not the architects of value also implies that humans can be wrong about what is good and what is true. Lewis himself admits that, while the Tao itself never changes, our understanding of it can evolve while remaining consistent. To live in the Tao is

⁵ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2 (Harper and Row, 1975), 615–16.

to accept the limitations of one's own mind with humility, and to forever doubt one's ability to know the truth in its entirety. But life within the Tao is also a life anchored to reality; one that admits of the truth of truth.

So here is what the rebel must be for: The rebel must stand for and in the Tao, and the rebel must reject ideology. This is no small task; in a culture defined by ideological thinking, cleaving to the Tao is a countercultural act. It is also a risky act. Rejecting ideology and living within the Tao does not mean retreat from opinions or from defending one's convictions, but the opposite. The Tao calls no one to a weak-chinned, anemic fence-sitting; it calls for courage, never cowardice. Living within the Tao means that, one day, those who defend it may very well may need to challenge authorities—political authorities, social authorities, moral authorities—who fail to recognize what is good and what is true. Defenders of the Tao should prepare to rebel.

As for how to rebel, there is Albert Camus's *The Rebel*. At first glance, Camus seems to have little in common with Lewis. Lewis was a devout Christian and theologian, devoted to asking the big questions of Christian faith and pondering their answers. Camus was a skeptical, atheist philosopher whose raw and honest reading of the problems of human life continues to resonate today. And yet, if *The Abolition of Man* helps its readers understand how to recognize what is good, *The Rebel* helps them understand how to defend what is good.

Perhaps obviously, given that he wrote a book entitled *The Rebel*, Albert Camus was a man generally skeptical of authority. He had no love of hierarchy, and believed that institutions were often more likely to harm people than help them. Some of his best friends and closest intellectual influences, the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, were quintessential examples of the “Innovators” that Lewis warned against, and pioneers of a school of thought that held, at its base, that objective value is a cultural myth, made up by those in power to stay in power. The human atrocities that ravaged Europe during the mid-century were, to them, proof that there is no universal “good.” Camus, however, continually asserted that objective value must exist, because the alternative was nihilism. The failure to respect objective value, for Camus, landed the world in the morass of the twentieth century—and continued failure to respect that value would only cause further decay.

Camus wrote *The Rebel* in an attempt to understand the patterns of thinking that gave way to a world where, he noted, with no little despair, modern man could justify the wrongness of any act, up to and even beyond murder. This mire of moral relativity, Camus asserts, originates when those who challenge authority cease to be “rebels” and become instead what he terms “revolutionaries.” While we might use the words *rebellion* and *revolution* interchangeably today, for Camus the difference between the two was of utmost significance. For Camus, it was from rebellion that all good political change had ever and would ever spring; it is to revolution that we owe our inheritance of nihilism. The rebel, for Camus, is the person who stands for what is good; the revolutionary is the person who seeks to destroy the very concept of goodness itself. The rebel hopes; the revolutionary despairs.

Camus, like Lewis, understood goodness not as historically and socially constructed but as an expression of truth that exists outside human time. As such, present modes of authority and established order might have things wrong, and rebellion against established order might be necessary to rectify these wrongs. The rebellion of enslaved people against those who enslave them is the key example. When the slave rebels, Camus says, the slave affirms his own dignity. He rebels because he loves himself, his family, and his friends and, should the slave rebellion successfully secure freedom for those who are enslaved, the rebellion ends. The rebel, in Camus’s depiction, remains tethered to what he calls “eternal verities”—in other words, he stands within and defends Lewis’s Tao. His rebellion aims at the restoration of what is good and true, knowing that humans and human institutions may have it wrong.

Rebellion requires three things of the rebel: love, doubt, and limits. First, rebellion has its genesis in love, or affirmation. When the rebel draws his line in the sand, he draws that line because he recognizes something within himself as good, and true, and worth preserving against the slings and arrows of the established order. When the rebel rebels, he rebels *for* that which he loves and not, crucially, because he hates those against whom he rebels. While opposition and enmity are perhaps inevitable side effects of the conditions that create rebellion, they are never the source of rebellion.

Second, the rebel’s love can only exist because the rebel believes in something bigger than himself. As such, the rebel appeals only and always to what is objectively good and true—an intelligible and external standard of value. Because the rebel does not make up his own rules but agrees to play by the rules

of the Tao, the rebel knows that the ends cannot justify the means. Killing for justice is oxymoronic—killing upends justice. The rebel recognizes that any act of violence he commits incurs a debt to justice that is his alone to answer for. To this end, violence is the rebel's last resort, not his *modus operandi*. The rebel who engages in violence is the one who willingly sacrifices his right to participate in any future he might win as a result. As Camus puts it, the rebel sacrifices his own right to the "we shall be" to stand for the "we are." The rebel knows the costs of his actions, and willingly pays his debts to restore justice if he breaks from it. The rebel accepts that he might be wrong, but remains assured that he has done his due diligence to seek rightness.

Finally, rebellion is *limited*. The rebel seeks clear and discrete redress for wrongs and aspires to no victories beyond the limited scope of his rebellion. The rebel seeks real freedom from the unjust conditions that restrain him. This is not a pure libertinism that demands the ability to do whatever one desires, but is rather freedom with an object. The rebel seeks, fundamentally, the ability to flourish as a human being; beyond this capacity, he has no further mission of conquest.

Revolution, comparatively, inverts these three requirements, and as such is the harbinger of the most nefarious twentieth-century ideologies and every other form of ideological extremism within our world today. Revolution, juxtaposed to rebellion, emerges not from love but from hate, not from affirmation but from negation. If success is to be achieved for the revolutionary, it requires not merely dethroning his enemies, but their complete destruction. For the revolutionary to succeed, the old order must be torn out, root and stem, and replaced by the new order. No piece of the old can remain: not its morals, nor its politics, nor its society, nor its economics. The last king must be strangled with the entrails of the last priest. Revolutionaries regard the very idea of value itself as simply a tool of the established order, and reject external standards of value as oppressive. Instead, revolution, based in ideology, justifies all means employed in the name of its ultimate end. In the name of freedom, liberation, equality, or fraternity, revolutionaries may justly kill, maim, and condemn. These righteous causes, in turn, must be so essential, so vital, that they cannot possibly be limited. Revolutionaries seek to liberate not only themselves and their families, but the whole world. Revolution has no destination other than the progressive implantation of its central ideology across every vista of the earth.

Revolutionaries permeate American politics. To identify them, one need only ask the question: At what cost? For the revolutionary, the true adherent to ideology, the answer will only and ever be: At any cost. Revolutionaries are those who, as Camus puts it,

forget the present for the future, the fate of humanity for the delusion of power, the misery of the slums for the mirage of the Eternal City, ordinary justice for an empty promised land. They despair of personal freedom and dream of a strange freedom of the species; reject solitary death and give the name of immortality to a vast collective agony. They no longer believe in the things that exist in the world and in living man. . . . [Such] blind men entertain the puerile belief that to love one single day of life amounts to justifying whole centuries of oppression.⁶

Rebellion, alternatively, is the mark of those who truly love life, who believe in the world and in living man, and do not disdain these things. Rebellion is the assertion of moderation over extremism. Rebellion does not, as revolution does, counter extremism with extremism. The rebel stands against both the ills of established order and the nihilism of revolution, in love and doubt and within limits. The rebel never seeks the answers to fundamental questions within himself but affirms his ideas only through appeals to the Tao. For all these reasons, the rebel is Camus's great protagonist of political history.

How, then, to rebel? How to push back against a politics that incentivizes the worst in people, that blinds them to the truth, that keeps them stuck in predictable patterns, that makes them shallow and self-absorbed? How to rebel against a politics of a people on their knees? This is what it requires: affirmation of the existence of real, objective value—the “eternal verities” or the Tao, by other names. Now, there is only the work of rebellion in action, in a world where revolution has become the standard.

First: The rebel must understand that rebellion and ideology are mutually exclusive. The rebel is a person of ideas. The rebel wrestles with the world; the rebel contemplates a truth larger than himself and sets his eyes upon it. The rebel's ideas are his own and no one else's, and he defends them for what

6 Camus, *The Rebel*, 305.

they are, and nothing more. The revolutionary, alternatively, is an ideologue, who comes to revolution through a tidal wave of negative emotion and through adherence to a prescribed set of notions set before him by others, which he will defend far beyond the limits of decency or goodness, because for him, the glorious ends justify the ugly means. While the rebel aims at the satisfaction of Lewis's Tao, the revolutionary would break and bend the Tao to serve his purposes.

Next: The rebel must reject the impulse to abstraction. The rebel is a person of place. Rebellions are specific—they concern real people in real places in specific times, not abstract ideas of “all people, in all places, in all times.” The rebel does not love some broad ideal of “humanity,” because humans cannot love abstractions. Instead, the rebel loves particular humans. The revolutionary puts the abstract before the specific, like the character Jean-Baptiste Clamence in Camus's final work, *The Fall*.⁷ Clamence, confessing his story to a stranger in a seedy Amsterdam bar, admits that in his younger years he excused his abuse and defrauding of others with his decadent public philanthropy, declaring a “love for humanity” while he failed to truly love those close to him. The hollowness of Clamence's ethic is revealed to him in a split second of cowardly weakness, wherein he fails to save the life of a young woman committing suicide. As the young woman falls from the bridge, the scales fall from Clamence's eyes and he recognizes the depths of his own misanthropy. His general “love for all humanity” is meaningless, if he cannot be moved to save a real and breathing human beside him. The rebel, comparatively, is the person who reaches for those beside him first. The rebel knows where and to whom he belongs; only this belonging can yield the love necessary to rebel.

Finally: The rebel must not seek instant gratification or his own edification. The rebel is a laborer. The rebel rejects the temptation to burn everything down and rebuild it anew; the rebel always begins from where he finds himself. The rebel's goal is always change on the margins. One thing at a time, one goal at a time, one rebellion at a time, sustained by the lifeblood of affirmation, humbled by the persistence of doubt, and restrained by respect for limits. Rebellion is hard intellectual work that requires the rebel to reject the easy road of ideology for the difficult one of free thought, open to the wide and uncharted expanse of truth

7 Albert Camus, *The Fall* (Vintage, 1991).

itself. Rebellion is hard communal work that requires the rebel to love those in his proximity, and to take on the burdens of knowing and being known. It is the work of a lifetime, not one shining moment. Rebellion, unlike revolution, is not about glory. Rebellion is nothing more or less than what Eugene Peterson, co-opting and subverting the phrase from its originator, Friedrich Nietzsche, called “long obedience in the same direction.”⁸ The rebel is the person who does the work of rebellion knowing that it might be fruitless, or unrewarding, but that nothing less is demanded of him by that final authority, the Tao. Rebels accept that all must be done the hard way, or no way at all. Rebels do not bask in some kind of perceived moral superiority over their fellows, nor do they steamroll their adversaries in the name of winning. They only persist in the Tao, knowing it to be the only source of all righteousness and truth, and that in it, they may lose battles but can never lose the war.

This, then, is how to rebel: Refuse to settle for a piece of the Tao and commit to loving the whole of it. Ask not only whether things *can* be done, but whether they *should* be done. Be aware of your own shortcomings, ready to be corrected when you are in the wrong, and ready to accept grace if you require it. Refuse to allow the ends to justify the means. Love the truth. And be in your place, wherever that may be. T. S. Eliot wrote that “home is where one starts from.”⁹ Rebellion begins where you find yourself. It does not require going “out there.” It requires only orienting oneself toward ideas and away from ideology, toward affirmation as opposed to negation, toward humble doubt as opposed to perfect certainty, and reconciling oneself to the limits of what one ought to do, as opposed to justifying what one can do. One need only love well those things to which one belongs, and be a part of the place, and time, and people in which one finds oneself. Do not wish it away; do not desire it all burned and rebuilt. To rebel, love what there is for you to love enough to want to make it better through long, slow, painstaking labor over a lifetime.

In the heart of the rebel lies this persistent truth, that there are no lost causes, because there are no gained causes. There is only the Tao, in which all goodness and righteousness is contained. There is, as T. S. Eliot wrote,

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (InterVarsity Press, 2019).

⁹ T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *The Four Quartets*.

only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Eliot, "East Coker."