

**VIRTOUS LIBERALS:
AN ESSAY ON VIRTUE, THE LIBERAL STATE
AND THE CHURCH AS ALTERNATIVE**

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INTRODUCTION

Can modern liberalism provide a sufficient account of an ethics of virtue? This is the question to be examined in this essay. The work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Regan will be analyzed as both thinkers have two very different perspectives on the state of modern liberalism. After scrutinizing their work, I will present a critique of the liberal state, drawing substantively on the work of Stanley Hauerwas. In the course of the discussion I hope that my contention will become clear: the liberal state cannot offer an adequate account of an ethics of virtue.¹

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE: THE MORAL STATE OF MODERNITY

In his book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre gives his profound impression of the state of moral discourse in modern liberal society. He writes,

[I]n the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the . . . state of grave disorder . . . What we possess . . . are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have — very largely, if not entirely — lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.²

It is MacIntyre's conviction that before the Enlightenment morality focused upon the virtues of the moral agent, as opposed to the modern understanding of morality that focuses on rules that are cogent for

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everyone. The ancients believed that human beings have a *telos*, that is, they possess a common direction of development toward the fulfillment of life's end or good. The notion of a *telos* means that moral statements can be true or false and thus the direction one takes in life can be right or wrong. Within the ancient tradition the language of virtue, therefore, provides the resources to settle moral contentions.

These moral resources, however, do not exist in the Enlightenment understanding of morality. The Enlightenment made it impossible to resolve our fundamental moral disputes when its thinkers abandoned the concept of *telos*. Fact and value were divorced from one another. MacIntyre states,

To call a particular action just or right is to say that it is what a good man would do in such a situation, hence this type of statement too is factual. Within this [Aristotelian] tradition moral and evaluative statements can be called true or false in precisely the way in which all other factual statements can be so called. But once the notion of essential human purposes or functions disappears from morality, it begins to appear implausible to treat moral judgments as factual statements.³

Without a *telos* it seemed that traditional moral mandates were arbitrary as well as violations of human autonomy. Enlightenment philosophers saw the predicament involved in the rejection of a *telos* and attempted to find a new justification for moral injunctions. This justification was sought in some notion of universal human nature such as reason or freedom of choice.

Attempts at fashioning alternative foundations in rationality, social utility or logic have created a "liberal" culture where the individual is in control.⁴ Modern Western civilization is, therefore, constituted of self-interested individuals associated only loosely by contractual relations that are chosen freely and are part of a state whose basic purpose is to maintain order for private initiative. In other words such attempts to reground morality have failed. Modernity is left with nothing but fragments of a moral discourse whose unity and intelligibility have been lost. Enlightenment society has no way to pinion moral agreement.

In the rejection of a *telos* (at least, explicitly) and what constitutes the good in human life, there is no basis for moral standards or virtues to be held in common. This side of the Enlightenment we live in a wasteland of relativism that uses the language of emotivism. MacIntyre observes,

Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character. Particular judgments may of course unite moral and factual elements But the moral element in such a judgment is always to be sharply distinguished from the factual. Factual judgments are true or false [b]ut moral judgments, being expressions of attitude or feeling, are neither true or false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there is none.⁵

As Nietzsche understood so well, a morality with no agreed upon foundations is far from objective, but rather “expressions of subjective will.”⁶ We may continue to debate moral issues as if they are “objective,” but the reality is that such debates are illusions. Morality in the Enlightenment becomes a matter of personal taste. Such moral discourse creates a world the ancients could not know. Philip Turner notes,

In such a world, moral chaos lies just beneath the surface. Society becomes a battle ground for the restless ego. A sharp distinction is drawn between fact and value. Against a morally neutral backdrop of fact, a certain cast of characters begins to appear. The contemporary Everyman is an aesthete well trained in the arts of consumption and enjoyment. He or she is serviced by a battery of therapists who hold no view of the good life but who provide techniques for adequate adjustment. The social order is handed over to managers and experts who again hold no view of the good life, but who are to promote abstract notions of justice and rights which allow people to pursue private pleasures without doing undue harm to others [I]n such a world, politics becomes subservient to the pursuit of private interests. Behind all the characters lurks the naked ego which seeks its own but is nonetheless homeless — with no sense of direction and no boundaries save those imposed by force from without.⁷

What is needed, according to MacIntyre, is a return to the notion of a *telos*. This would regulate the virtues, make the very search for life’s meaning the purpose of life, and would turn us to particular traditions for a narrative which will supply a sense of unity to life.

But MacIntyre holds no misconceptions about the ease of accomplishing such a task in our Enlightenment society. The only way to reverse our moral dilemma is to reject a large part of our modern

ethos; for as MacIntyre notes, “[W]e are already in a state so disastrous that there are no large remedies for it.”⁸ It seems that we live in the midst of a moral Babel.

RICHARD REGAN: THE VIRTUE OF LIBERAL SOCIETY

The perspective on modern Western society that Richard Regan presents is quite different from the panorama put forth by MacIntyre. Regan believes that Westerners can exult in the triumph of the democratic liberal ideal. He writes, “The ideal of freedom for persons and societies is properly human, and Westerners rightly rejoice in its institutional realization.”⁹ Though the price paid was indeed high, Westerners can enjoy free institutions.

Yet Regan is concerned for he fears that Westerners have become indifferent to the moral moorings that serve as the foundation of public and private well-being. A free society is no guarantee that society or individuals in that society will act wisely. Since Westerners are inclined to make a separation between the exercise of freedom and the “goal of proper human development,” that is, subjective will and objective reason, such indifference it seems is always a possibility.¹⁰

Regan sees evidence for this indifference to moral virtue on two levels. On one level Western liberal societies have created appetitive individuals with no desire to moderate their appetites. On the second level persons tend to be numb or even belligerent to the materially disadvantaged in society. To be succinct: “Western liberal societies have spawned possessive individuals.”¹¹

But Regan believes there is a way out of this moral dilemma of “individuals without communal moral goals and a collectivism without personal freedom for individuals.”¹² Such a solution can be found in the origins of Western political thought.

First, Regan argues that the tradition of reason should comprise the public philosophy undergirding the civic culture of Western democracies — the tradition of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. He writes,

In Athens of the fifth century B.C., Socrates confronted a situation very similar to and almost identical with the one Western society faces today. The Sophists of fifth century Athens, like many post-Enlightenment liberals of the twentieth century West, made achievement of each individual’s aspirations the measure of all things without regard for the relation of those aspirations to the properly human development of the individual in community with others. Socrates, followed by Plato and Aristotle in

the fourth century B.C., opposed the subjectivism and privatism of the Sophists, and the three suggested principles relevant today to serve as the basis for a civic culture conducive to personal and communal virtue.¹³

Socrates' point of departure was reason, which Regan believes is what makes human beings distinctive. The entreaty to reason instead of to any article of religious faith, emanates from the origins of Western civilization and should be satisfactory to citizens who are reflective and responsible.

Regan also contends that the state should play only a limited role in coercing moral behavior. The principle of subsidiarity commits the state to a limited role in the evolvment of civic culture that contributes to moral virtue. In a rightly ordered society, legal coercion should be the last means of encouraging virtue.

Legislation to enforce public morals should meet two conditions: First, legislation should be made only on activities that seriously harm citizens and community. Second, such legislation should enjoy broad support from people of various religious and ethical preferences. Concerning these principles Regan states,

The two are interrelated: legislation prohibiting or regulating activities causing serious harm to citizens and the community are likely to enjoy broad support, and legislation enjoying broad support is likely to involve activities which cause serious harm to citizens and the community. But that will not always be the case, since some citizens may think that certain activities cause serious harm while others may think that they do not. In my opinion, the pluralist character of Western democracies requires that the second condition be satisfied as much as the first.¹⁴

Lawmakers and citizens must seriously consider these two principles when considering legal restrictions.

Finally Regan argues that freedom of religion is part of the tradition of reason and religious commitment contributes to the formation of virtuous citizens. The tradition of reason must be open to the role religion plays in human society. Freedom of individuals is necessary if society is to be rightly ordered and this includes freedom of religion. It is religion that offers a potential bulwark for civic virtue. Yet Regan hastens to add that the right to practice one's religion is "subject to the requirements of a just order in society."¹⁵ When these requirements are violated the state may justly restrict religious practices.

But when the requirements of a just order are kept, religion plays an important role in forming virtuous citizens.

What is crucial to note here is that, unlike MacIntyre, Regan believes that modern liberalism has the language to form virtuous people. For Regan the problem is not liberalism but its excesses. MacIntyre, on the other hand, thinks that a virtuous society is possible only after a rejection of a large part of our modern ethos. Enlightenment liberalism, according to MacIntyre, is the problem that has created our moral dilemma.

A CRITIQUE OF VIRTUE AND LIBERAL SOCIETY

It is true that there is nothing that prevents liberal societies from giving an account of an ethics of virtue. In fact no society can free itself from recommending that its citizens have certain virtues. Liberal societies tell us to be loyal to our nation, to be fair, tolerant, and sincere.¹⁶ Thus the questions that must be asked at this point are not the ones that deal with the possibility of an ethics of virtue in a liberal society, but the ones that "have to do with which virtues we acquire, how they are acquired, and what they tell us about the kind of social order in which we exist."¹⁷ Liberalism may be able to provide an account of an ethics of virtue, but will that account be sufficient?

It is appropriate, I think, to ask why it is that modern moral philosophy has neglected the virtues. While recognizing the existence of other minor reasons why this is the case, I believe it is primarily because of the Enlightenment project of developing a morality without a history for, "we lack the kind of community necessary to sustain development of people of virtue and character."¹⁸ Indeed the notion of *telos* is a historical one. The Enlightenment's rejection of a *telos* was also a rejection of history as significant for the moral life. Thus modern liberalism's ahistorical approach to morality is one that hinders a correct understanding of an ethics of virtue, because without a *telos* and a context how one differentiates the virtues is arbitrary. How can a people be sufficiently virtuous if they share no common good?

In this situation the virtues that are important are procedural, which means for Stanley Hauerwas, that such an account

is insufficient, if not self-deceptive. For the very notion that these "procedural" virtues can be divorced from some determinative conception of the good is itself a substantive claim. As a result, the nature of the moral life is distorted as virtues such as humility, temperance, courage, and prudence are made secondary to

these truly "public" virtues. Indeed, the situation is worse, since by definition the more "procedural" virtues undercut the social significance of virtues such as humility by suggesting that these virtues cannot be supported socially because any support would violate the individual's freedom. As a result, however, the liberal often fails to see that they are training people to be virtuous which in their own terms is coercive since they claim to be creating a social order that respects the "right of everyone to be virtuous in their own way."¹⁹

When such a distinction is drawn between public and private, an ethics of virtue becomes problematic in that people of virtue are not necessary for the political realm to function as it should. Liberalism proceeds on the belief that a polity can be formed apart from moral virtue, because the freedom of the individual is of supreme value. This is decidedly different from the classical perspective that a good polity should produce good people.²⁰

Now Regan certainly thinks that modern liberal society can produce virtuous people, but he has no adequate public basis for making such a claim; for in the liberal vista, individuals are merely "bundles of interests" in rivalry against one another. Ironically, in order for this system of competition to work the people doing the competing should be virtuous. Yet liberal theory offers no context for virtue.²¹ Even Regan's attempt to use the "tradition" (a historically dependent word) of reason to justify his argument is an ahistorical move to produce a people of virtue in any responsible and reasonable society. Where does Regan get the idea, in the first place, that there is such a thing as a tradition of reason²² and what would he suggest we do with all the unreasonable people in society (allowing his own definition of reason, of course).

In conjunction with this, Regan's argument for the necessity of a limited state, in contributing to moral virtue is deeply ironic. It is Regan's contention that a limited state is crucial for allowing the individual the freedom to live virtuously, yet the very assumptions of liberalism make virtue unnecessary and, therefore, invite more control by the state. Hauerwas observes,

When we are not able to count on the other to be virtuous we must then rely on institutions, most often the state, to compensate for this. The more we rely on the state to sustain the relations necessary for social life, the less it seems we need people of virtue — and so a vicious circle begins.²³

In arguing for a limited state, Regan wants Western citizens to be people of virtue. But given liberal assumptions can he have a limited state? For if religious practices can be justly restricted by the state for certain reasons, does this not mean that the state will limit itself only when it can afford to do so? When people cannot be counted on to act virtuously (vice in this context is anything that threatens the just ordering of society), then the state is called in to compensate for lack of virtue. This can be seen in the fact that America has tended to move away from being a limited state by becoming extremely litigious, since our freedom allows us to live to the limits of the law.²⁴ The notion of a limited state in liberal society is not very helpful.

It would be interesting to inquire into what makes a virtuous liberal. Regan is distressed by the material appetites of individuals in Western liberal societies. He quite clearly believes greed to be a vice, but given his assumptions should this be the case? If indeed people are nothing but "bundles of interests," and the individual is autonomous, then it appears that modern liberalism encourages greed as a virtue, as long as one's greed doesn't interfere with the greed of one's neighbor.²⁵ Possessiveness is not an excess of liberalism, rather it is its logical outcome. Hauerwas writes, "Liberalism thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; a social order that is designed to work on the presumption that people are self-interested tends to produce that kind of people."²⁶

It is no wonder that there is so little consensus about what virtues are and which virtues are cardinal. Modern moral philosophy provides us with no way to determine which virtues are primary. It is often said that one of the great aspects of liberal society is its pluralism. Yet pluralism is a very deceptive term, for what is pluralism but a synonym for fragmentation? Having no vision of the common good of society we are left as individuals to pursue our own selfishness. If Michael Walzer is right when he states that "a liberal nation can have no collective purpose,"²⁷ then any account of the virtues from a liberal perspective must be insufficient; for an analysis of the virtues requires a conception of the common good. The very notion that America is a pluralist society may indeed mean that there is no sufficient American community on which to base an adequate ethics of virtue.

It seems from this discussion that the very presuppositions of liberalism work against liberalism. When freedom of the individual is made the highest value in a society, it cannot help but create less than virtuous people who cannot be depended upon. Moreover, any account of an ethics of virtue from a liberal perspective cannot take into account what Gilbert Meilaender affirms — that "some things we may need to say (ethically) about the relation of persons and their communities are dangerous as guides to political life."²⁸ This does not

mean that a liberal ethics of virtue cannot challenge the state in some way, but it certainly cannot threaten its existence; for a liberal ethics of virtue wants to affirm the liberal state. It is impossible for such an account, therefore, to give serious consideration to *sōphrosunē* (sound judgment). MacIntyre writes,

[O]n the best account of the virtues we have, whatever it turns out to be, the virtues will be disruptive of and dysfunctional to the common life of some social order. And to have reached this conclusion is not unimportant. [In the view of modern liberalism] it does seem that the practice of the virtues in any order will always be fundamentally conservative, preservative of the functioning of that order. That [liberalism's] functionalist generalization is false opens up the possibility that being virtuous may require one to be at odds with the established modes of the common life in radical ways. The virtue of *sōphrosunē*, like other virtues, can be a virtue of revolutionaries.

Regan's account of virtue has no place for *sōphrosunē* and this reveals what is most disturbing about his position: it is part and parcel of a flawed ecclesiology.

THE CHURCH AS ALTERNATIVE

For Regan the ultimate ethical task of the church is to make virtuous liberals. His account offers no possibility for the church to resist the liberal state. The task of the church, from Regan's viewpoint, is to underwrite the modern liberal ethos, rather than to stand as an alternative to it. What Regan fails to take into account is that no matter what the state may say (and really believe), it will not voluntarily keep itself limited when an alternative to that state actually exists. It is precisely my contention that as an alternative to the state, the church represents a threat to the sovereignty of the liberal state or any state for that matter; for a Christian's unconditional allegiance to Jesus Christ must by necessity qualify all other allegiances.

Regan has made Christianity palatable to the liberal nation because he has domesticated it. This is important because 'it makes a good deal of difference what kind of church and what kind of preaching it is that is allowed to be so free.'³⁰ Indeed, it appears to be the case that Regan has received what he's wanted, as the liberal mindset has, in not a few places, infected the church in America in tragic ways. It is reminiscent of a story related to me of a church where a member said that

the most wonderful thing about her church was that no one told anyone else how to live for God.

Now some will protest that the vision of the church as political alternative certainly isn't a settled issue. The liberal state may be fragmented, but the church cannot boast that it is more unified. So how can the church hope to offer an ethics of virtue that stands as an alternative to the liberal state?

I certainly do not deny the lack of unity that has existed and still continues to exist in the church, but I do not see how this undermines my contention that the church is a political alternative. Such a view is certainly more in keeping with the New Testament than a perspective that sees the church as one organization among many whose purpose is to form loyal liberals. I maintain that the difference between the church and the liberal state is that the church is formed by a story that's true. It is a story that has an ending, or a *telos*; for the only correct perspective from which to view the Christian story is an eschatological one. The church provides the language capable of giving a true and sufficient account of an ethics of virtue that the liberal state can in no way deliver. The modern Western state denies that there is an end to the liberal story and, therefore, rejects history as crucial for giving a true account of morality.³¹ But by her very nature the church provides "a paradigm of social relations otherwise thought impossible."³² For the church's task is not to form virtuous liberals, rather the church is a story formed people whose ethical task is to be itself.³³ The liberal state has nothing on which to found its abstract morality. The moral foundation of the church is nothing less than the resurrection of Christ.

This means that Christian virtue is an account for a specific people; for any account of virtue is context dependent. In trying to develop an ethics of virtue for everybody and anybody, the development of a liberal ethics of virtue is a project whose very undertaking undermines its accomplishment.

No matter what legitimate quarrels one might have with the details of MacIntyre's account, he has nonetheless accurately portrayed our current condition. But this should not cause Christians to despair. We believe that with Jesus Christ God's Kingdom comes, and in Jesus Christ God has purchased for himself a new nation of people — the church — as an alternative to any other nation. Christians, therefore, pursue a life of Christian virtue that bears witness to that Kingdom. We are indeed a hopeful people.

ENDNOTES

¹I realize that the phrase "ethics of virtue" is somewhat problematic, but it is still a phrase that merits use as it separates the classical understanding of the moral life from the modern moral perspective. It is not part of my agenda to discuss this difficulty as the subject requires more space than I can adequately give it in this paper, but I am aware of the problem.

²Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 2.

³*Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴Behind this is the false assumption that the very concept of the individual qua individual is intelligible.

⁵MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 11-12.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 113. While I want to avoid the objective/subjective distinction, Nietzsche's point is correct.

⁷Philip Turner, review of *After Virtue*, by Alasdair MacIntyre in *Anglican Theological Review*, January 1983, p. 115.

⁸MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 5.

⁹Richard J. Regan, "Virtue, Religion, and Civic Culture." in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XIII, Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue* eds., Peter French, Theodore Uehling, and Howard Wettstein (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 342.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 343.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 346.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 349.

¹⁶How far sincerity can go in American society is, I think, an interesting question. After all, we are constantly told that we are a government of laws not of men, which doesn't appear to leave a whole lot of room for sincerity. Yet sincerity highlights the moral importance in liberal society of the individual.

¹⁷Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living in Between* (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1988), p. 192.

¹⁸Idem. *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 117.)

¹⁹Idem. *Christian Existence Today*. p. 192.

²⁰George Will is right to observe, "Men and women are biological facts. Ladies and gentlemen — citizens — are social artifacts, works of political art. They carry the culture that is sustained by wise laws, and traditions of civility. At the end of the day we are right to judge a society by the character of the people it produces. That is why statecraft is inevitable soulcraft." *The Pursuit of Happiness and Other Sobering Thoughts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 3.

This does not mean that the state should make good people but rather it needs to direct its people toward the good (Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 248). I can think of no better example of how the American state has failed to direct its people than in legalized abortion. Indeed at the end of the day we as Christians in America must judge negatively our society (or any society) because it has legalized the killing of children.

²¹Indeed, for Kantian philosophers accounts of virtue have taken second place (if that) to accounts of obligation. If dealt with at all, the virtues are treated so abstractly as to be unhelpful. See James Johnson, "On Keeping Faith: The Use of History for Religious Ethics." *Hastings Center Report* 9 (August 1979), pp. 21-22.

²²I am not convinced that Regan really uses the notion of "tradition." Tradition is passed down from generation to generation. Reason is something that Regan believes all reasonable people possess. Thus reason need not be passed down and therefore cannot be referred to as a tradition.

²³Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, p. 191.

²⁴Idem. *A Community of Character*, p. 75.

²⁵Some would probably prefer to substitute "prosperity" for "greed." Such terminology merely clouds the issue.

²⁶Ibid. p. 29.

²⁷Michael Walzer, *Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 69.

²⁸Gilbert Meilaender, *The Limits of Love: Some Theological Explorations* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), p. 132.

²⁹Alasdair MacIntyre, "Sōphrosunē." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XIII*, p. 11.

³⁰Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), p. 127.

³¹It must not be thought that liberalism is not a tradition. One of the corrupt aspects of the Enlightenment liberal tradition is that it is a tradition that denies this is so, and promises to free us from all the traditions that infringe upon our autonomy.

³²Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 12.

³³Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 99.

