

Transcending Right and Left: A Question of Virtue

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There are times, Jacques Maritain comments, when “to be neither right nor left means simply that one intends to keep his sanity.”¹ France in the 1930’s was such a time and place, he thought, and it was again so in the 1960’s.

So what about us, here and now? Should *we* be neither right nor left, if only to keep our sanity? For reasons which include the noise of cultural implosion, Maritain might well say “yes, surely so!” But with equal emphasis, he would ask us to do more than keep our wits about us. He would urge us to go beyond the very categories of “right” and “left.”

Thus encouraged, I want to explore some strategies for doing just that. But I am afraid we can’t begin by simply clearing out the underbrush that blocks our way. First we will have to spread it out and sift through it. We will need to inventory the verbal vegetation that’s grown up. It has been a long time, after all, since someone—or was it a committee?—worked out the seating arrangements of European legislatures and thereby gave rise to the ancestors of today’s categories.

Happily, Maritain himself begins our task. He identifies, and then illustrates, both a physiological and a political “right” and “left.” In what he terms the physiological sense, it is temperament that’s the issue. There is a spectrum, to be sure. But the *pure* right relishes cynicism and disdains charity; it finds disorder worse than injustice. The *pure* left, in contrast, disports itself in perpetual fantasy; it finds what’s *not* always preferable to what *is*. (Examples? For Maritain, Nietzsche is of the right; Tolstoy is of the left.)

Shifting to the political sense, Maritain’s focus is on our “ideals...and historic formations,” that is, the usual social and economic expressions of the

¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 22.

temperaments of “right” and “left.” But expect surprises. The bloodiest revolutions, he opines, are “revolutions of the left carried out by men of rightist temperament” (try Lenin) and the weakest governments are “governments of the right run by leftist temperaments” (try Louis XVI).²

Notable commentators, with increasing irritation, have themselves offered to take inventory. *Perhaps* they give us an advance over Maritain. None is more forthright than Justice Antonin Scalia. He finds that, in America, the terms “right” and “left,” at first hearing, indicate extremes. Their partisans are thought to take flight, either as “rightwingers” or “leftwingers.” On closer review, though, he notes that “right” and “left” also, and unpredictably, distinguish: (1) libertarians from statists, (2) laissez-faire capitalists from socialists, (3) friends of the *status quo* from its foes, and even (4) nationalists from internationalists, or some shifting mix of all of these.³

Lesser notables, students among them, also try to improve on Maritain’s inventory. But so far mine have failed, except in confusing themselves. None of them know where to put Louis Farrakhan, and most of them are unsure about where to locate themselves. For all I know, this last puzzlement is a good sign.

How about Maritain? Where are we to find him on our spectrum? Remember: we left him, during critical decades, fearing for his sanity and so insisting that he was neither right nor left. Well, then, how do others see him? By temperament, he admits, he is “what people call a man of the left.”⁴ But by resolve he distances himself from the extremes of both camps. Still, he is “less distant from [the left] when it is a question of the things that are Caesar’s and from [the right] when it is a question of the things that are God’s.”⁵

And what about a fix on Justice Scalia? *That’s* a question prudence bids us postpone. For now we will do better to focus on Jacques Maritain, especially the Maritain who encourages us to be more imaginative than either the “right” or “left” of the established and deepening *disorder*.

Imaginative or not, we at least need to be watchful. For even the “safe” testimony that we are neither right nor left leaves us vulnerable. Thus Emmanuel Mounier, himself a recovering abstainer, spoke sharply to the overly judicious. “Abstention,” he said, “has a habit of adopting neither-neither attitudes,” and it

² *Ibid*

³ Antonin Scalia, “Of Democracy, Morality and the Majority,” *Origins* (June 27, 1996), pp. 83-84.

⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, p. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26. In a like vein, John F. Kavanaugh cites Dorothy Day: “When it comes to the Catholic Church, I go to right as far as I can go. But when it comes to labor, pacifism and civil rights, then I go as far as I can to the left.” *Following Christ in a Consumer Society* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991). (Dedication).

exchanges history for utopia.⁶ This utopianism serves “to create barren revolutionaries...who often claim...to carve out a ‘third way’ when all they have to put into the pool is bitterness, negation and impotence.”⁷

Maritain would agree. A merely nervous abstention from “right” and “left” is an emergency measure. We must get beyond these ubiquitous but played-out categories, and we can. The question is *how*.

Might we try a critical synthesis? Initially, the prospects seem dim. What can we fashion from the conceptual underbrush that’s spread before us, thick with litter? Ah, patience! We have by no means completed our inventory. And perhaps the concepts of “right” and “left” could not so long endure without *some* coherence. Maybe they even capture a bit of truth. In any case, our critical synthesis must first extend our inventory, however daunting the work. Then, if we identify some suitably coherent elements, our synthesis might take us a few steps forward.

Let me propose that we take as our “principle of synthesis” the classical thesis of the unity of the virtues. The thesis, to be sure, is hotly disputed. But even before we put it to the test, we must first find and introduce some key virtues of “right” and “left.” In what follows, I mean by “virtue” a disposition of character that enables a person better to achieve the good.

We begin with “the right.” Might we not let the friends of the “right” lay special claim to the virtue of a deep historical sensibility? Russell Kirk’s account of, say, the roots of America’s civic order persuades and illuminates.⁸ Because of his historical *gravitas*, he finds no temptation in the fantasies of utopia. He finds no blessings in the schemes of tyranny. Because he has a strong grasp of tradition, he can help us achieve a measure of continuity in change. Indeed, change there has been and change there must be if history is to have a living subject and tradition a dynamic content.

And might we not allow the friends of the “right” to make a privileged claim to the virtue of a keen awareness of human malice? John Lukacs’s analysis of why we need the State, even come the ascendancy of a new communitarianism, tells a truth that gets lost amid the protests of wishful thinking.⁹ Because he can see—and sometimes taste and touch—the evils we have wrought, he can gauge our capacity to cause greater evils. Lukacs, too, can help us achieve

⁶ Emmanuel Mounier, *Be Not Afraid: A Denunciation of Despair*, trans. Cynthia Rowland with a foreword by Leslie Paul (New York: Sheed and Ward), p. 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁸ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1991).

⁹ John Lukacs, “Our Enemy, the State?” *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring, 1996), pp. 108-16.

continuity in change. And he does so in a way that betters the odds that we will not confuse rot with renewal.

We can look now to “the left” for a different pair of virtues. Might we not let the friends of the “left” advance a special claim to the virtue of regard for personal authenticity? Endemic as our hyper-individualism is, Charles Taylor’s account of the project of self-realization is eloquent and instructive. He reminds us that human integrity demands a decisively personal integrity.¹⁰ If we are to live together, we must share a language. But we must each, one by one, write our own autobiographies. Moreover, apart from my choices, how will the story be mine? And without our individual choices, there cannot be any change in which to find continuity much less any continuity that *we* achieve.

And might we not also allow the friends of the “left” to make a privileged claim to the virtue of zeal for the dignity of the people or (so be it) populism, in its best sense? Omnipresent as are our appeals to the imagined (or manufactured) will of the people, Christopher Lasch’s analysis of how technocratic elites busily eviscerate our democracy becomes compelling. It is a salutary *caveat*.¹¹ For if some of us decide that ordinary people are not smart enough or disciplined enough to govern themselves, then the theoretical dignity of ordinary people has already become a practical fiction. Yet if we so smoothly and efficiently dismiss democracy, we also forfeit the heart of our political legacy.

With these new and virtuous elements of “right” and “left” before us, we can now begin a foray into critical synthesis. For can’t we, at least, try to unify the virtues of historical sensibility and awareness of human malice, on the one hand, with the virtues of regard for personal authenticity and a zeal for the dignity of ordinary people (a class into which death gathers us all)? Prudence, temperance, courage, and justice form a unity—so Aquinas argues. Each seeks the others in order fully to be itself. But if such a thesis has been held for the cardinal virtues, might not we also advance it for some flagship virtues of “right” and “left?”

I suspect that these special virtues converge, much as do the cardinal virtues. I *cannot* prove my claim; a single strategic counter-example might dash my hopes. Consider, though, the following and roughly parallel observations. They are, at least, intriguing.

Historical sensibility invites an awareness of human malice. If we know the history of this century, we know why some speak of its growing “culture of

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 73-80.

¹¹ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), especially pp. 25-49.

death.”¹² If we understand our history, we can respect the modesty of Camus’s goal: to be neither a victim nor an executioner. Nor can we rightly assess the depth of human malice apart from an awareness of our bloodied century. Right judgment demands full disclosure. Surely our special virtues of the “right” readily converge.

Now let’s look to the “left.” A high regard for personal authenticity seems to invite a zeal for the dignity of the ordinary person. For why should we care about personal authenticity, unless we recognize the intrinsic worth of the person—the very worth that grounds human dignity? Nor does it make sense to have a zeal for the dignity of the ordinary person, unless we live in the conviction that the ordinary person is also *extraordinary*, extraordinary in having a self that can achieve a distinct personal authenticity. It seems that our virtues of the “left” also converge.

But can we take the next, and much larger, step? Can we join the virtues of the “right” and of the “left?” Can we show that they complement each other? From a theoretical vantage point, it seems so. Historical sensibility and an awareness of human malice scarcely need undercut a high regard for personal authenticity. Indeed, these “rightish” virtues might make us more sober in our quest for authenticity, But sobriety is an ally on a hard journey.

What are we to say, though, about a zeal for the dignity of the ordinary person? Some on the “right” contend that historical good sense and nose for wickedness show us that the ordinary person has neither intrinsic worth nor fundamental dignity. But their verdict is muddled. For the evil in which the cynic rubs our (often) powdered noses is horrific *because* it assaults the dignity of the ordinary person. The “culture of death” is heinous *because* it affronts the intrinsic worth of the person. The point? Once again, the virtues of the “right,” an historical sensibility and an awareness of human malice, enhance rather than undercut a virtue of the “left,” here the zeal for the dignity of the ordinary person.

Yet will we find a like compatibility when we look to the virtues of the “left” in relation to the virtues of the “right?” For a start, how do a regard for authenticity and a zeal for the dignity of the person fit with, and contribute to, an historical good sense? The “truth of a person,” as Karol Wojtyla puts it, lies within the nature of the person, and we realize our nature if we live authentically. But a person’s life story offers an historical sensibility its *premier* subject. We cannot, in any case, be sensible to the historical dynamic of persons unless we look to their quest for authenticity. We can record neither the great victories nor the

¹² See, for example, John Paul II’s *Evangelium Vitae* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

great defeats of the person apart from the measure of authentic self-realization. The virtues, now from “left” to “right,” are again complementary.

But we still must consider how a regard for personal authenticity and how populist zeal fit with, and contribute to, an awareness of human malice. The convergence, though, is hardly elusive. If we honor authenticity and seek the dignity of the ordinary person, we will soon become alert to how often we perversely jeopardize both. But this is to be aware of the worst about our own malice—and its recurrence through history. Again, we find complementarity.

A ready objection, however, might be that I only find a complementarity in the virtues of the “right” and of the “left” because of selective sampling. A more honest review of experience, the skeptic might insist, points to widespread conflict. Thus Isaiah Berlin deplors “the natural tendency of all but a very few thinkers to believe that all the things they hold good must be intimately connected, or at least compatible, with one another.”¹³

Nor would Berlin, who excels in the study of non-canonical philosophers (from Joseph de Maistre to Moses Hess), hesitate, in pitting virtue against virtue, to “name names.” Is it an American audience? He just might ask (though he hasn’t) how we’d square the civic republicanism of a William Bennett, on the “right,” with the expressive individualism of a Snoop Doggy Dogg, on the “left.” Or, to shift venues, and drastically, what about reconciling the orthodoxy of Bernard Law with the liberality of the late Joseph Bernardin?

Isaiah Berlin’s objection, re-enforced with his hard cases, easily leads to another. Those who insist on a complementarity, or even a unity, of the virtues do so against history’s testimony and the deep pluralism of the age. Worse, they put us all on the fast track to totalitarianism. Would we be free? Then let’s bury our philosopher kings and forget their fables. Let’s, instead, insist on a liberal polity. We must eschew an imaginary common good in favor of a real, and narrowly procedural, justice. For example: do the goods of life and of autonomy threaten to conflict? Why, we shall vote our worries away! What’s “just” is simply what the majority, itself in flux, determines to be just. And if the matter before us is a “big deal issue,” well, then, we’ll require a big majority.

Isaiah Berlin’s objections are hugely influential. In the political realm, they have long carried the day. Nonetheless, we can counter, if not refute, them. For there is both a general and a particular reply to Sir Isaiah’s pessimism about the virtues. If our response is promising, there is a marvelous bonus. It’s that we can hope, and hope robustly, to transcend the very categories of “right” and “left.”

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 128.

First, there is a general reply. When our supposed virtues *seem* to conflict, we must immediately ask whether they are, in fact, misdescribed. Indeed, sometimes supposed virtues might have become so distorted that they no longer count as virtues. For example, do justice and mercy conflict? Well, vengeance and indifference surely do. But justice and mercy are alike in that to practice either we must look to all morally relevant factors. Having done so, we might very well see that “justice” not tempered by mercy is merely vengeance. We might also see that “mercy” without justice is a species of indifference.

Again, civic spirit need not oppose artistic spontaneity, any more than piety condemns the juggler who performs before the Altar. Civic spirit takes joy in the arts of the *civis*, the city. At the same time, the artistic spontaneity of the expressive individual need not disregard the community—unless, that is, any artist who seeks an audience must compromise his or her integrity. Rather, insofar as art communicates, it incorporates a regard for the community. If Mr. Bennett and Mr. Dogg can’t work together, it is more likely due to the mischief of vice than to the conflict of virtue.

But a second and equally particular reply to Sir Isaiah’s jaundiced view of virtue offers us a more worthy case. In reflecting on “right” and “left,” Maritain reminds us of one of his most sparkling alliances. “Saul Alinsky,” he writes, “is a staunch organizer of ‘people’s communities’ and an anti-racist leader whose methods are as effective as they are unorthodox.”¹⁴ Maritain the Scholar and Alinsky the Activist delighted in each other’s strengths. But there’s more. They gave evidence of their respective virtues through their delight in one another. Though “left” in temperament, Maritain had the virtues of historical sensibility and awareness of human malice. Though “right” in temperament, at least in being cynical about altruism (personal or systemic), Alinsky had the virtues of personal authenticity and a regard for the dignity of the ordinary person. Reflecting on their friendship, each wrote with candor. Maritain, commenting on Alinsky’s *praxis*, confides: “...on the level of pure action a kind of boldness in practical self-contradiction is probably, as you suggest it, the sign of a healthy and fecund mind. Yet it makes me jumpy.”¹⁵ Alinsky, for his part, confesses to Maritain: “I can never be anywhere the person you are because you really love all people...There are some people I not only do not love but hate with a cold fury that would stop at nothing.”¹⁶ And yet at the deepest level there was

¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, p. 23.

¹⁵ *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky*, ed. Bernard Doering (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 110-111.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

convergence. Maritain describes Alinsky as “a practical Thomist.”¹⁷ And why not? For Alinsky writes that the true radical is “that person for whom the common good is the greatest personal good.”¹⁸

Of course, neither our general nor particular replies to Isaiah Berlin are decisive. But philosophy, Elizabeth Anscombe reminds us, is seldom a “thumb screw.” In any case the dogma that Berlin, and his sympathizers, put forward becomes less and less intimidating. And, indeed, there’s a further critical point.

Berlin’s position is at core a thesis about the virtues. It leaves us with “right” and “left” forever at odds, if not at each other’s throat. It tells us that it is impossible to get beyond these excruciating categories, never mind the concrete lives that say otherwise. And Berlin’s position reduces the common good, to which Maritain and Alinsky insistently call our attention, to whatever a merely procedural justice provides. Thus, among other tragedies, we are left to pit life against autonomy. But the true common good, Jacques Maritain argues, includes both; and if we fail to find a way to make the common good the affair of government, we will soon enough strip government of its authority. Enter “the regime.” If *this* is what is in store for us, we will thereby forfeit our historical sense and our hard-learned lessons about human malice. We will forfeit, too, our best hopes of authenticity. We will imperil any shared respect for the dignity of the ordinary person.

In the sharpest of contrasts, a unity of the virtues, if understood and practiced, offers us an altogether different horizon.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

¹⁹ Carroll Kearley and Timothy Shanahan, with collegial grace, commented on versions of this essay.