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Response

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“Putting Liberalism In Question”: Principled Pluralism and the Quest for an American Public Philosophy

In Response to
James W. Skillen's lecture

American Statecraft: A New Art for the 21st Century

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“Putting Liberalism In Question”: Principled Pluralism and the Quest for an American Public Philosophy

Kenneth L. Grasso

In his lecture last night, Jim Skillen offered a very powerful account of the nature and dignity of the art of statecraft as they emerge in the light of Christian revelation. What I thought I would do today is to relate the principled pluralism outlined by Jim Skillen in the concluding portions of his lecture to the contemporary American public argument and, more broadly, to contemporary America’s quest for a public philosophy. (By principled pluralism here I mean the view that the “normative order of creation” issues in a wide variety of social institutions of which the state is only one. Far from seeking to absorb these institutions, the proponents of principled pluralism insist, government must look with favor upon them, respect their God-given structure and legitimate autonomy, and assist them in the fulfillment of their responsibilities through the establishment of a “public order of justice” interweaving these groups and their distinct missions.)

As Dr. Skillen suggests, at the heart of American public life today a “battle” regarding the proper role of government in the overall scheme of social life that “rages between those on one side who want government to primarily to make room for . . . the invisible hand of free market providence, and those, on the other side, who want government to do whatever it can to achieve greater equality,” those who want to minimize the role of the state and maximize that of the market against those who embrace the idea of a large interventionist state charged with the establishment of greater economic equality and the reordering of social life in accordance with the demands of individual autonomy, pitting those who champion what is sometimes called the nightwatchmen state against those who advocate what is sometimes term the liberal welfare state. Although these school of thought exhibit real and important differences, these differences should not be allowed to obscure the broad underlying agreement that exists between them. Both seem to agree, for example, that the basic unit from which our thinking about social and political life – what Robert Nisbet calls “the prime unit of theoretical and practical consideration” -- is the individual understood as the bearer of subjective rights (above all, the right to choose one’s “values” and “lifestyle”) which trump the claims of the common good, public morality, “social ecology” or the autonomy of nonstate institutions. Indeed, both seem to understand the role of the political community as providing a framework of order within which individuals can pursue their self-chosen ends.

Both thus seem to acknowledge a single goal for, and a single limit upon, state action – namely, the rights of the individual. As a result both tends to reduce all political issues to clashes of individual right. (The issue of pornography, for example, is often framed as a simple conflict between the right of individuals to read or view what they choose and the right of others not to have materials they find offensive thrown in their face. The broader social dimensions at issue – such as pornography’s effect on the tone of the culture and the broader social ecology – thus disappear from view.)

Inasmuch as neither school of thought possesses what Jean Bethke Elshtain describes as a “robust way to thematize” nonstate social institutions, both experience grave difficulty in addressing the whole subject of these institutions and their place in

the overall economy of social life. On the one hand, they oftentimes take these institutions for granted (viewing them as, in Mary Ann Glendon's words, "something" which "like the natural environment" is "simply there," simply an enduring feature of social life) or to ignore them altogether. Alternatively, they tend to understand them as little more than temporary and wholly contractual aggregations of individuals united for purely utilitarian reasons, and thus as lacking a determinate natural structure. (One sees this phenomenon in the far-reaching transformation of family law in recent years and the ongoing debate over the proper definition of the family and whether or not such a definition is even possible.) In any case, these two schools of thought tend toward a model of society that revolves around three poles: the individual, the state (understood as the guardian of individual rights and provider of the framework of order within which individuals can pursue their self-chosen activity) and the market (understood as a realm of free individual action in accordance with a utilitarian calculus of self-interest).

Against the backdrop of these underlying areas of agreement, the conflict between the party of the market and the party of the welfare state appears to concern less ends than means. In essence, what we have today is a conflict between rival individualisms: a conflict between a libertarian individualism and an egalitarian individualism, between an individualism that sees the maximization of the market's role as the best means of protecting individual autonomy and an individualism that sees a large interventionist state as the best means to this end.

In recent years it has become clear to a variety of observers on both the right and the left of the conventional political spectrum that all is not well with American public life, and that many of our difficulties are a function, at least in large part, of the radically individualistic vision of man and society that informs our public life and argument. Yet despite the widespread recognition of its inadequacy, the fact is that our public argument remains imprisoned in this horizon. The obvious question is why this should be the case.

Although a variety of factors are undoubtedly in play here, there can be no question that one of the most important is that impact of a particular intellectual tradition on our political consciousness. The tradition in question is what is sometimes called liberal individualism or Enlightenment liberalism. For this tradition to play an important role in shaping America's political culture is nothing new. The passage Jim began with from the Declaration of Independence illustrates its influence on the America of the founding era.

What is new is the extent of its influence. Today, the other intellectual currents that once help shape our self-understanding – and blunt liberalism's impact on our political culture – have largely disappeared from public view. As a result, liberalism now supplies the conceptual framework that orders both our public argument and the idiom within which it is conducted.

As MacIntyre has observed, in contemporary American public life "so-called conservatism and so-called radicalism in general are mere stalking-horses for liberalism." Contemporary America's public "debates," therefore, "are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals and radical liberals." Thus, although our public argument may put into "question this or that particular set of attitudes or policies," it does not put in question "the fundamental tenets of liberalism" itself. Taking place on the premises of liberalism and in the idiom it prescribes, our public argument leaves little place for "putting liberalism in question."

Now if from its emergence in 17th century England, liberalism has been a highly individualistic doctrine, the fact is that in the course of its history the political theories generated by the liberal tradition have veered toward a progressively deeper and more radical individualism. Liberalism, as Michael Walzer has noted, “seems . . . to produce in each generation renewed hopes for a more absolute freedom from history and society alike.” Indeed, the history of liberal thought is largely the story of the triumph of the will – the triumph of the subjective will of the individual over those elements in the political theories of earlier generations of liberal thinkers that had originally acted to restrain it.

This radical individualism finds signal expression in contemporary liberal theory. At the heart of contemporary liberal thought is an understanding of human beings as sovereign choosers, as in Michael Sandel’s words, “free and independent” selves “unbound by moral ties antecedent to choice,” sovereign selves “unencumbered by aims” not of their own “choosing.” The self is thus “installed as sovereign cast as the author of the only obligations that constrain.”

Moving from this view of human beings as essentially sovereign wills, the theoreticians of this new liberalism embrace what be called a wholly voluntarist conception of social relations. They move, this is to say, toward what Francis Canavan describes as a view of social relations external and voluntary, and of “the individual human being” as “an atom, motivated by self-interest, to whom violence is done if he is subjected to a relationship with other human beings that he has not chosen.” Social relationships come to be understood not as the natural product of man’s dynamic orientation toward his own perfection, toward the realization of his natural good, but as, the “essentially contractual” products of the subjective preferences (the self-chosen goals) of naturally autonomous individuals.

Liberalism’s formative influence on our political consciousness is one of the major factors responsible for the individualism that pervades our public argument. If we recognize the inadequacy of the radically individualistic vision of man and society that issues from liberalism, the question remains of why we experience such difficulty in transcending the horizon of this individualism. To answer this question, it is necessary to grasp that liberalism was never merely a theory of politics. To be understood, as Roberto Mangabeira Unger has shown, liberalism “must be seen all of a piece, not just as a set of doctrines about the distribution of power and wealth, but as a metaphysical model of mind and society,” as “a metaphysical system.”

To be understood, in short, liberalism’s theory of state and society must be seen against the backdrop of the rationalism and nominalism that inform its metaphysics of the person. This nominalism and rationalism, in turn, ultimately entail what two recent authors term “the rejection of teleology,” of “the claim that there is a discoverable excellence or optimal condition . . . which characterizes human beings” as such. This rationalism and nominalism issue in the denial of an order of human and social ends that obligates us prior to, and independently of, our consent to pursue these ends, in the denial of what Dr. Skillen terms a “normative order of creation.” Liberalism’s own metaphysics of the person thus move it inexorably toward the vision of man as sovereign will and purely contractual conception of social relations that inform contemporary liberal theory and so profoundly shape our public argument.

Against this backdrop, it becomes possible to see not only why liberal political theory has moved inexorably toward an ever deeper, ever more radical individualism, but also why we have experienced such difficulty transcending the individualistic horizon within which our public argument remains trapped. What we have tried to do

is to break with the corrosive individualism of liberal political theory without breaking fundamentally with liberalism's metaphysics of the person, without rejecting the metaphysical first principles that are a defining feature of liberalism as a distinctive intellectual tradition. Our efforts to transcend liberalism's radically individualistic model of man and society have not succeeded for the simple reason that doing so would involve understandings of the nature and destiny of man, the human good, and the structure of social relations proper to human life that are unsustainable in the light of liberalism metaphysics of the person.

The difficulties that have beset communitarian thought illustrate my point. Perhaps the most influential effort to articulate an alternative to liberal individualist model of man and society, communitarianism sought to forge a new public philosophy that would take its bearings from man's nature as a social being and which would provide us with a "third way," with an alternative to the visions championed by both the party of the state and the party of the market. Today, it is increasingly clear that communitarianism has failed to realize these laudable aspirations. While it has offered an incisive critique of liberalism, "when it comes to providing a constructive alternative to liberalism," as Thomas A. Spragens has pointed out, we find that what communitarian theory provides us with "rather thin fare." Likewise, instead of providing us with a third way, the communitarian program, as Christopher Lasch notes, turns out to be indistinguishable from "social democracy" consisting of little more than a slightly fine-tuned version of the liberal welfare state.

The reasons why are not mysterious. As a number of commentators have noted, what communitarianism has tried to do is to forge a political theory that will rein in the hyperindividualism of contemporary liberal theory without breaking in any deep or fundamental sense with liberalism as an intellectual tradition or the metaphysical premises that inform it. If contemporary communitarianism's efforts to forge the thicker, richer model of man and society we need have not borne fruit, it is because the intellectual tradition on which it has chosen to draw makes such a model impossible.

What I am suggesting here is that the better model of society we need requires something more than the type of partial critique of liberalism we witness today – it requires nothing less than a fundamental break with Enlightenment liberalism, a break that extends not merely to selected features of liberalism's theory of politics, but to the very metaphysical first principles that inform liberal thought.

This recognition enables us to appreciate the promise of principled pluralism. What principled pluralism offers us is an alternative to the liberal vision of man and society rooted in an alternative of the nature and structure of the human person and the very structure of reality. It begins from the metaphysics of a created universe, with the idea of an ordered universe created and sustained in being by a personal God. Insisting that there exists a knowable and teleologically ordered human nature, it affirms that, in Canavan's words, "our common human nature as created by God" is the source of "obligatory norms of human action."

As a person, as a being made in the image and likeness of God, man indeed possesses intelligence and free will. Man, however, is not the sovereign self of liberal theory, as a creature he is obliged, as Canavan writes, "to frame his life through free choices in accordance with a law built into our common human nature by the Creator, who is the first truth and supreme good," a creature called upon to make his actions serve God's purposes.

This metaphysics of the person points toward a conception of politics impossible on the premises liberalism's metaphysical vision: an understanding of politics that

encompasses the idea of an objective moral order grounded in a substantive vision of the human good, an understanding that encompasses the recognition that man is a radically social being from whose dynamic orientation toward the realization of his God-given nature flow a whole array of social institutions that possess a natural structure that must be respected.

If against the backdrop sketched here it becomes possible to appreciate principled pluralism's promise, it also becomes possible to recognize one of the major obstacles it faces. Principled pluralism's insistence that the state respect the legitimate autonomy of other social institutions is not rooted in some type of agnosticism, in a desire to evade judgments about the nature of man, the human good and the structure of social relations proper to human life. As J. Budziszewski has recently reminded us, when a state animated by an authentically pluralist vision of social life "defers to parents and church" – and we might add, to other social institutions – it "has not thereby suspended [moral] judgment." Its judgment that the "jobs" of these institutions "are not its own," is a product of principled pluralism's own "particular moral and religious understandings" of principled pluralism's distinctive conception of nature of the human person and the deeper metaphysical and theological vision in which it is rooted.

Absent this understanding and this vision, principled pluralism's claims about the right ordering of society are not simply unpersuasive – they are unintelligible. The problem principled pluralism confronts is that the anthropological, moral, metaphysical and theological understandings on which it rests are far from universally shared in contemporary America. Indeed, they are at odds with the understandings that prevail in our culture.

In this context, it should be stressed, it doesn't really matter whether or not these understandings possess a distinctively Christian character and thus presuppose as a condition of their acceptance the embrace of Christian revelation or are accessible independently of this revelation. Shaped in decisive respects by the heritage of the Enlightenment, our cultural environment is increasingly both post-Christian and post-metaphysical. It rejects, this is to say, not only the claims of Christian revelation, but those of metaphysical and moral realism as well. And, insofar as it rejects these claims, it necessarily rejects the model of man and society, that informs principled pluralism. By doing so, it cuts the ground from underneath principled pluralism's theory of politics, and indeed renders that theory simply unintelligible.

My point is that replacing the liberal model of man and society with the model embodied in principled pluralism will be no simple matter. Requiring of the American people what John Courtney Murray once termed "a new moral act of purpose and a new act of intellectual affirmation, comparable to those which launched the American constitutional commonwealth," comparable to these which launched the American experiment in self-government and ordered liberalism, it would involve a cultural revolution, and indeed a spiritual revolution, of considerable magnitude. Indeed, it would require a spiritual and intellectual revolution of the magnitude of the Enlightenment itself.

It is difficult to envision such a revolution taking place any time soon. This doesn't mean we should despair. Climates of opinion do change – ages of doubt are succeeded by ages of faith, ages of skepticism by ages of affirmation. Besides, we have it on the highest authority that God's purposes in history cannot ultimately be frustrated. In any case, as Mother Teresa so tirelessly reminded us, it's not success that matters, it's faithfulness.