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The State, Virtue, Sex and Chastity

by

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The right to privacy covers a multitude of sins, not the least of which are sexual. Because sex is private, so the reasoning goes, the state has no business involving itself in sexual matters. *Polis* and *eros* have nothing to do with each other. Of course, the political decision to distribute condoms in high schools contradicts such reasoning. Nevertheless, the politicians who legislate in favor of contraception and, even worse, abortion, continue to deny the interest of the state in the sexual lives of its citizens. But the spread of AIDS has changed that, exposing as a political dodge the specious appeal to the right to privacy when the common good of the polis is undermined by the sexual activities of some of its citizens. This paper advances the position that the common good and the state's interest are best served not by legislation, thus far ill-conceived, but by education in virtue, specifically chastity.

That the state has an interest in virtue must in today's society sound like a ludicrous idea. Yet it is as ancient as Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*. In fact, both Plato and Aristotle regarded the study of virtue as a branch of political science. They reasoned that since man existed only in society, that is, in the (city-) state, the state and the individual, therefore, had the same end, namely, to attain the good life.¹ Thus, for example, justice should inform not only the operations of the state but also the actions of its citizens. The case, of course, was the same for the other three virtues discussed in the *Republic*: prudence (actually "wisdom"), fortitude and temperance. If either the state or its citizens was party to moral corruption, the good life was imperilled. It is understandable, then, that "Plato was not a man to accept the notion that there is one morality for the individual and another for the state."²

While such notions as "virtue", "the good life", man's proper "end" are not foreign to us, the original context for understanding them largely escapes the contemporary mind. Herein lies its difficulty for accepting the ancients' refusal to dichotomize morality into a public sphere and a private sphere. The difficulty is further compounded by the fact that in the development of western thought the study of virtue lost its moorings in political science and, by the time of Immanuel Kant, was consigned to the subjective and private realm where, of course,

religion was banished. To this day, the modern mind cannot dissociate morality and religion, with the result that in the public forum any mention of morality raises the battle cry against "imposing one's religious beliefs on others." The Cuomo-syndrome of being "personally against/politically for" abortion is another indication of today's moral dichotomizing.

The Original Context

What was the original context that made virtue, the good life and man's end intelligible, and made splitting morality into public and private spheres inadmissible? Although they practiced piety towards the gods, the ancients were, of course, devoid of revelation. Hence their only source for ascertaining man's proper end, his true good and the virtue needed for its attainment was *reason*. For the Greeks, man was by essence *animal rationale*, distinguished from all other beings by an ability to think and to choose. He exercised this ability in a world which was harmonious and orderly because governed by principles intrinsic to every being. In speaking of the principle which determined the behavior of any creature of a certain kind, the Greeks used the term "nature." Empirically, the nature of fire differed from that of a rock or a bird. Each behaved differently as, indeed, did man whose nature, governed by the law of reason, accorded him freedom of choice in his behavior. But here lies the rub. For the ancients, every nature, even a nature characterized by knowledge and freedom, operated within a *teleological* context. That is, every nature was bound by a built-in purpose or goal.

The notion dates back to Socrates and became fundamental in the thought-system of Plato and Aristotle. A thing was structured by its nature to operate toward a specific end which Plato and Aristotle equated with its "good". Within this teleology, the good was defined by Aristotle as "that at which all things aim,"³ the end or purpose wherein the thing's mode of acting came to term. Since end and good were really one and the same, the proper and purposeful functioning of a thing was simultaneously the realization of its good. We may note too that in this scheme, good is not in the first instance something that lies outside the thing but rather something intrinsic to its nature, specifically, its actions. Naturally, in the case of man whose nature permitted him free choice in his actions, the question was paramount as to what constituted his actions good or what purposeful activity enabled him to realize his nature. It was within this teleological framework that the issue of virtue arose.

As mentioned earlier, ethics was a branch of political science because the ancients admitted no distinction between the end and good of the state and that of the individual. In answer to the question concerning what was for the state and the individual the supreme good or end to which all else was subordinated, Plato and Aristotle both agreed, *eudaimonia*, that is, happiness.⁴ Through ample discussion they arrived at the content of that happiness: the life of virtue. Says Aristotle, "Let us assume then that the best life, both for individuals and states, is the life of virtue, when virtue has external goods enough for the performance of good actions."⁵ Thus, it was for the attainment of virtue that states acted, for

example, in governing by laws and that individuals acted, for example, in cultivating certain interior dispositions. Because of this common good or end, Plato could propose that between the happiness of the just man and that of the ideal state, there was a real analogy as there was between the justice or right order informing the state and that informing the polity of the soul.⁶

Virtue Identified

While the good life was one of happiness and happiness was a life of virtue, what exactly was virtue? Following in the footsteps of Socrates, Plato identified virtue with knowledge. Although he admitted distinct virtues, such as the four moral virtues which he mentions in the *Republic*, they found their unity in knowledge. Plato held to the belief that no man chooses *de facto* evil knowingly but rather mistakes it for the good. Consistent with his teleological viewpoint, Plato claims that all choices which a man makes are *sub ratione boni*, by reason of the good he perceives. Logically then, a man's moral failure and responsibility are in function of his ignorance.

However limited Plato's view on virtue, the equation of virtue and knowledge does assume, and indeed, require that virtue be taught. That project, of course, fell to the state which found embodiment in Plato's famous "philosopher-king." Be that as it may, it was Aristotle who made the project practical and brought it, so to speak, within the grasp of the ordinary citizen. Owing to what one author called his "analytical habit of mind," Aristotle de-etherealized the notions of good and virtue and with "psychological delicacy" placed them within an ethics of will and intention.⁷

For Aristotle, it is only partly true that happiness consists in a life of virtue. For him the happiness which is the good or end of man must also admit knowledge (wisdom) and pleasure. In this hierarchy of wisdom, virtue and pleasure, wisdom pertains to man's highest faculty, viz., reason, virtue to the powers and appetites of his soul, and pleasure, the attendant result of wisdom and virtue. Jacques Maritain, taking his lead from Aristotle, says that man's happiness is as complex as man himself and is thus made up "of matter and spirit, of sense and intelligence, of animal conditioning and rational, even supra-rational freedom, all of this crowned, and guided by wisdom and contemplation."⁸ In short, happiness involves the total man, body and soul. Furthermore, the teleological framework of Aristotle's thought required that man act toward the good in such a manner that his choices be in accord with his rational nature. It is in reference to these choices and their concomitant effect on man's soul that Aristotle defines virtue.

In his *Nichomachean Ethics* he says "the virtues are modes of choice or involve choice . . . [they are] states of character."⁹ Aristotle calls them "excellences" that perfect man in his choices and enable him to make them with ease. Virtue, to quote Maritain again, is a "stable disposition which fortifies and perfects the powers of the soul in respect to the *right use* of freedom."¹⁰ This "right use of freedom" finds its explanation in Aristotle's notion of what today we call "the happy median," that is, the notion that "virtue lies in the middle." To use Aristotle's words, "Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice,

lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us."¹¹ Aristotle conceives virtue as a mean between the two extremes of excess and defect with regard to man's feelings and actions. Thus, for example, courage is the mean relative to the feelings of confidence which at the extreme of defect makes a man's character cowardly and at the extreme of excess makes it rash and foolhardy. Liberality is the mean between miserliness and prodigality; wholesome pride between false humility and puffed-up vanity; pleasant wit between boorishness and buffoonery; etc.

These myriad vices or extremes which affect man's character are hard to name, says Aristotle. What is more, the median position which virtue assumes between them cannot be determined with mathematical precision. Human feelings and actions are far too complex for that. For this reason Aristotle defines virtue as the mean "relative to us," that is, it is relative not to theoreticians, but to work-a-day people who have acquired moral savvy through practical experience.

In any case, virtues are what the later medieval philosophers called good "habits." They are qualities which inform the will, dispose its choices for the good and thereby render the character of a man good. Habituated to choose the good, a man so perfects his nature that he knows and chooses the good "co-naturally." Knowledge and choice of the good are, as it were, "second nature." But to arrive at this point requires some doing. After all, virtues are not in-born; they must be acquired through education. Moreover, they must be exercised and practiced until they become "a state of character." With his analytical habit of mind, Aristotle distinguishes the man who merely performs just and temperate acts from the man who performs them virtuously. In the latter case, the man acts from a state of character; in the former, he does not. Thus, there is a distinction between acts which *create* a good character and acts which *flow* from a good character already created. Aristotle says, "it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good."¹²

Before broaching the topic of chastity, we should mention about Aristotle that having given examples of virtues as means between two extremes he gives distinct coverage to each of the moral virtues. Temperance is the one relevant to our topic because chastity is a species of temperance. Of temperance, Aristotle says that it is the mean with regard to pleasure, the excess of which is self-indulgence and the defect of which is no pleasure. Since pleasure naturally accompanies many human activities, like eating or skiing or reading, the pursuit of a man to eliminate pleasure must be one of the rarest of vices. Aristotle gropes to find a name for this type of defect and makes do with "insensibility." Whatever the defect it seeks to remedy, temperance deals largely with the excess of pleasures, most often of the physical sort, by which a man indulges his appetites.¹³

Finally, it bears mentioning that Aristotle, by way of transition to his book on *Politics*, ends his *Nichomachean Ethics* by appealing to the state. With consummate realism he says, "it is difficult to get from youth up a right training for virtue if one has not been brought up under right laws; for to live temperately and hardily is not pleasant to most people, especially when they are young." With this the case, Aristotle cites the opinion that "legislators ought to stimulate men to virtue and urge them forward by the motive of the noble . . ." In the absence of such public

concern, says Aristotle, "it would seem right for each man to help his children and friends towards virtue . . ."14

That injunction seems hardly to have been followed, if three centuries after its writing St. Paul is to be believed. He says of the pagans that "Even the women pervert the natural use of their sex by unnatural acts (*para phusin*). In the same way the men give up natural sexual relations with women and burn with passion for each other."15 Paul's judgment seems harsh but it is characterized in the concrete the failure of Greek wisdom to make men and women virtuous. Having at Athens experienced first-hand the disdain of the Greek philosophers,16 Paul concluded that "God in his wisdom made it impossible for people to know him by means of their own wisdom." Realizing this, Paul thus proclaimed that "God has made Christ to be our wisdom."17

The gospel and Greek philosophy have had in their encounter enormous impact on each other. Leaving that subject to the specialists, however, we note in passing that Christianity claimed as the source of its wisdom not mere human reason but divine revelation. Essential to that revelation was the fact that Christ redeemed man from slavery to sin and corruption and instituted an economy of grace wherein man could attain virtue and live a new life. In characterizing this new and virtuous life, the *Second letter of Peter* uses words with a philosophical ring that speak of man sharing in "the divine nature" (*theias koinonoi phuseos*).18 Were an ancient Greek to hear such words he would conclude that, in the Christian, a new principle operated equipping him to act toward a *divine* good or end which transcended earthly happiness. In short, without prejudice to man's natural "telos" or end-in-life, grace empowered man to achieve one that was *supernatural*.

St. Thomas and Chastity

It is in relating the order of nature and grace that St. Thomas Aquinas manifests his great genius. He does so in the *Summa theologiae* by effecting a remarkable synthesis between the Christian faith and Aristotle. While mingling divine and human wisdom, Thomas does not diverge philosophically from Aristotle in the matter of the cardinal virtues. We turn, at long last, to Thomas' treatment of chastity.

In his *Summa*, Thomas, unlike his Greek mentor, gives specific treatment to the virtue of chastity.19 While strictly speaking there exist only four cardinal virtues, Thomas, like Aristotle, admits by extension sub-species of these. Thus, under temperance, Thomas considers as virtues, abstinence, fasting, sobriety, chastity and virginity. As an exercise of temperance, each virtue is defined by the sense-object which stirs man's sensual appetite. Hence, the virtues of abstinence, fasting and sobriety regulate man's appetite for food and drink while chastity and virginity regulate man's appetite for sex.

To say that the above virtues "regulate" man's appetite requires for the sake of clarification a brief digression into the psychology which governed Thomas' thinking. Like Aristotle, Thomas understood an appetite to be a thing's bent toward a good, or, an inclination towards an end. Moreover, he acknowledged

the effects of the sensory appetites when they responded to sense objects. According to customary usage, Thomas called those effects, "passions," which today we call "feelings." So primal an appetite like that for food or sex necessarily stirred in man strong feelings like those of love, desire and pleasure. Of themselves such feelings are irrational, products of man's animal nature and in need of integration with man's spiritual nature. It is at this juncture of man's animal and spiritual nature, that is, at the juncture of his feelings and his reason that temperance comes into play. St. Thomas says "that it pertains to moral virtue to safeguard the good of reason against the passions that conflict with reason."²⁰ It falls, therefore, to temperance to regulate man's appetite for pleasure; to chastity to regulate his appetite specifically for sexual pleasure.

The virtue of chastity, therefore, introduces reason into the province of sexuality. St. Thomas says that "chastity requires that a person moderate the use of his corporeal members in accord with the judgment of reason and the choice of the will."²¹ Were reason and choice barred from this realm, man would be tyrannized by his sexual appetites and enslaved by his passions. When speaking of reason in the sexual realm, Thomas does not have in mind some persuasive logic or argumentation that compels a man, as it were, from the outside, to restrain his sexual behavior. *Ratio* for Thomas is something that has an intrinsic reference to reality so that to be in accord with reason means to be right "in itself." "The order of reason accordingly signifies that something is disposed in accordance with the truth of real things."²² Thus, by introducing "ratio" into the sexual sphere, chastity disposes a man so that in exercising his sexual appetites he acts "in accordance with the truth of real things".

Understanding this last phrase is of the utmost importance. To be "in accordance with the truth of real things" means to respect their natures. We have already defined nature as that principle by which a thing behaves so as to achieve its good or end. This teleology provides man not only the basis for objective science whereby he discovers purposeful behavior in nature but also an objective standard for gauging whether or not his behavior corresponds to the truth of real things. This idea of discerning in created things their inner "ratio" and of man's need to act in accord with it was refined by Thomas and later called the "theory of natural law."²³ The term ought not to distract us. We need only add that with his belief in God the Creator, Thomas viewed the world as governed by God's "ratio" which becomes, as it were, the inner law determining creatures toward their proper end. In short, God's reason and purpose for each creature is reflected in its nature.

Be that as it may, we may ask relative to our topic on chastity, what is the nature or inner "ratio" of sexuality? What is its end or purpose? How is its good achieved? It is only by answering these questions that we can appreciate how chastity disposes a man vis-a-vis his sexual appetites to act "in accordance with the truth of real things."

Neither Greek nor Christian wisdom ever denied that sex by nature was procreative, that it achieved its end or good in the physical generation of life. Seen solely in these terms, however, the exercise of sex between humans and that between animals is indistinguishable. But sex that is a human act demands

something more. The nature of man requires a permanent and stable relationship between male and female if the good of human sexuality is to be properly and fully realized. Thus, while sex is by nature procreative, its human realization requires the stability of marriage for the proper rearing and nurturing of children. Western tradition has, therefore, expressed the good or end of human sexuality and marriage as *proles* and *fides*, that is, as offspring and fidelity. (Christianity added a third term, *sacramentum*).²⁴

Another Dimension

Yet, in contemporary culture we tend to view human sexual activity exclusively in personal terms, that is, as the domain solely of the couple engaging in it. But there is another dimension that has been consistently recognized since the inception of western philosophy. St. Thomas expresses it very clearly: "the exercise of sex is of the utmost importance for the common good because it is [for] the preservation of the human race."²⁵ That is, in their procreative activity, male and female assure the continuance of the human race. In their persons they represent human nature: "each is one half in that nature and seeks the other half to complete a whole . . . it is from the level of that nature that the appropriate desires well up, so strong and demanded for survival as to call for a special virtue to temper them according to reason."²⁶ Chastity is, of course, that virtue regulating man's sexual appetite in accordance with the good end of sex, namely, "proles" and "fides."

In grasping the "ratio" or true nature of sex, man, therefore, has an objective standard by which to gauge whether or not his activity is "in accordance with the truth of real things." The moral man lives in such accord while the immoral man does not. Well-known and perennial are the failures of the immoral man in regard to the "proles" and "fides" of sexuality: contraception, abortion, adultery, fornication, homosexuality. In such assaults on the nature of sexuality, the order of reason is transgressed.

Yet, ironically, in the one who violates the nature of sexuality, the moral failure may not be against the virtue of chastity. Why? Because the virtue may not yet be present as a "state of character," as an "excellence" or ease in choosing the good, as "a stable disposition" perfecting the soul's powers. Rather, the failure, while grave, may be at a more superficial level and for this reason deserving another name: "incontinence." To fail in continency — today we call it "abstinence" — is not to fail in chastity. For the latter is a deep-rooted basic attitude, a second-nature, a virtue, while the former is an exercise in self-control, a first step or series of steps toward virtue, a rough sketch of what yet has to emerge.²⁷ Continency leads to chastity as repeated good acts lead to virtue. To fail in continency is *infirmitas*; to fail in chastity, *malitia*. Whether through weakness or wickedness, failure in the realm of sexuality is no trivial matter. For given the nature of sexuality, unchastity or incontinency affects both the character of the individual and the common good.

With this last comment we come full circle as we return to our opening remarks both about the decision of the state to distribute condoms and about

the predicament facing society with the spread of AIDS. For who could deny that, concerning the matters of condoms and of AIDS, both the character of individuals, specifically our youth, and the common good are at stake? Indeed, at risk! In both cases the state can claim no moral neutrality, either in fact or in principle. As to fact, the decision to make educational facilities conduits for condoms makes the state complicit in the inconstancy of those youths using them. As to principle, the spread of AIDS in society threatens the common good which the state is morally obligated to protect. In light of what we have said in this paper about the mutual good of the individual and the state, about the nature of happiness, of virtue, of sexuality and of chastity, there is an inherent and tragic contradiction in the legislative decision to distribute condoms to prevent AIDS. For with the aim of safeguarding the good of society, the state has become party to corrupting the good of its citizens.

As we have seen in classical political thought, to set the good of the state at odds with that of man as such is to imperil the good life for both. After all, in terms of teleology, man and the state have the same end, which is happiness. Furthermore, that happiness is dependent upon man's ability to integrate his rational and animal natures, that is, his reason and his appetites and passions. In this integration, the acquisition of virtue is so paramount that the ancients saw it as a function of the state to promote it.

If today the state cannot or will not promote virtue, at least it should not undermine it. Yet that is precisely what the state is doing where man's need for virtue is most poignantly felt, namely, at the level of his sexual appetites. In contemporary society, those appetites have gone terribly awry, leading an editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* to ask, "Is it any wonder that the HIV virus is spreading among teen-agers? In Washington, D.C., two-thirds of 10th-grade boys and one-fifth of 10th-grade girls report that they have recently had four or more sex partners Confronted with the grim shadow of AIDS, educators can think only of distributing condoms and appealing for 'safe sex'."²⁸ Under the tutelage of a teacher or parent, no teen-ager handed a condom and/or instructed in its use can take seriously the admonition for abstinence. As we know, abstinence is not even virtue but rather an exercise in self-control which along the road toward virtue is a first step. Promoting "safe sex" and condoms denies our citizens even that first step.

The spread of AIDS has made the illicit use of sex a deadly game. For the welfare of its citizens the state must educate not in sex but in virtue. The only safe sex is that informed by the virtue of chastity.

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