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## Virtue and Modern Society

Grant Matthew Gombert

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# VIRTUE & MODERN SOCIETY



Grant Matthew Gombert  
College Honors Program Senior Project  
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## I. Introduction

Virtue is a word not often used in the modern America. Even if it were used, it would be so misused that it would not be worth using the word. If asked, the average person on the street might tell you that virtue is an old-fashioned way of saying that someone is a good person or a good citizen – the sort of person who picks up litter in the park or volunteers for a charity. This understanding, however, is miles from the real richness of the word.

Virtue comes from the Latin *virtus* which means “man-ness.” It refers to a state of being a full or complete person. To say that someone is virtuous means that she is the fullness of what a person ought to be. *Virtus* is a term derived from the Greek word *arete*, meaning excellence or fullness. In other words, virtue refers to the whole person one is. It is true that the virtuous person is often a good citizen, a good parent, or a good employee but that is not the fullness of the term. Virtue is a more profound and more fundamental concept than mere rule following. To be virtuous is not to choose to do the right thing, it is to be the sort of person who always chooses to do the right thing by nature. This is, importantly, not the sort of person one becomes simply by a one-and-done act of the will. You cannot choose to do the right thing once and expect to be able to change your habits, addictions, tendencies, desires, etc. and do the right thing every time. The challenge of becoming virtuous is not quickly overcome. Becoming virtuous takes patience and long-suffering because it is a cultivation and formation accomplished one action at a time, over the course of a life. Aristotle famously said that you can only truly know if someone was virtuous once that person dies. It is only at the dread judgement seat of Christ that we can be accurately judged.

Thus, seeking virtue is seeking the fullness of life. It is not a moment or a rule, it is every breath from death to life. Looking back at the lives of those who have gone before us, we can

often see luminaries who showed what is to be a virtuous person, living in such a way that their excellence shows forth. For example, the overabundant generosity and charity of Mother Theresa marks her whole life. She is virtuous because of the sort of person she is, not because she followed some rule. We can look back and see the fullness of her whole person and life.

Because of this encompassing understanding of virtue, it is impotent to remember that the quest for virtue is not simple. We are formed slowly and by innumerable forces throughout our lives, from our birth to childhood and beyond. Parents, neighbors, environmental features, natural abilities and disabilities, and so much more forms us into unique individuals with unique starting points. So, if the path to virtue is the path of the formation of our whole person to be the most excellent person they can be, is a slightly different path for each person. Each has been formed and malformed in very particular ways so that progress towards the ideal of virtue must also be particular. Only running two miles is an action on the path towards excellence for the person who has never run any significant distance, but it would not be progress for the experienced marathoner. In the same way, running into the heat of the battle is on the path to courageousness for the well-trained soldier, but foolishness for the untrained person. The end point of being a full person does not change, but the particular manifestation of excellence is dependent on the particular person in question.

Virtue, rightly understood, is completely opposed to the idea that being a good person means you follow standardized, impersonal regulations. Rather, virtue is rooted in the person and cultivated with patience and time. So much of modern society disdains the slow and particular ways, preferring instead the fast and generalized ways. To become virtuous requires one to first understand one's own particular inheritance and formation be it upbringing, education, or even history. In much of modern society, this sort of knowledge is far from the

minds of most people. When he retired as a professor at Yale University in 2013, Donald Kagan reflected,

I find a kind of cultural void, an ignorance of the past, a sense of rootlessness and aimlessness, as though not only the students but also the world was born yesterday, a feeling that they are attached to the society in which they live only incidentally and accidentally. Having little or no sense of the human experience through the ages, of what has been tried, of what has succeeded and what has failed, of what is the price of cherishing some values as opposed to others, or of how values relate to one another, they leap from acting as though anything is possible, without cost, to despairing that nothing is possible. They are inclined to see other people's values as mere prejudices, one no better than another, while viewing their own as entirely valid, for they see themselves as autonomous entities entitled to be free from interference by society and from obligation to it.

Thinking about virtue for the sake of this project has encouraged me to think of my own upbringing and formation. In reflection, I have been given so much to allow me to know and observe these issues in myself, my peers, and my country. I have been cultivated by education in the great works and ideas of human civilization, immersion in Christian faith, and a life with a family who appreciated what is good, true, and beautiful. One of the most significant and particular influences is my time with my grandparents. When I was about three or four years old, I began a weekly stay with my grandparents. Every Tuesday, I would come to their house where they live on a farm in the Hill Country of Central Texas with its shrubby hills and sagacious Live Oaks. Going down the country road to my grandparent's house, a road I can drive in my mind's eye, I was entering into a rhythm that was normal for me. Each week my grandmother would drive her van to and pick me up from our suburban neighborhood. We would slowly drive to the little limestone covered house with a rusty tin roof that my grandfather had built with his father around half a century ago. As we drove down the curvy road, listening to some antique AM country station, we would pass hilly fields and brushland. Just before reaching my grandparents' house, we would slow down (even further) to cross a cattle guard left

over from the days before the subdivisions raced up nearby. By this sacramental act, we entered into a different culture.

I would only later realize that this was not the experience of many others in my life. Most of my classmates rarely went to a farm. They hardly understood how difficult it is to hear the distressed cries of lambs being weaned from their mother as they face their first nights alone, or how, when you have spent enough time with sheep, you can catch one even when it is running from you by a sixth sense the shepherd acquires for the predictable maneuvers of a frightened animal. With my grandparents I would pick green beans in the garden, sit on my grandfather's lap as he plowed the field, and help them prepare venison for dinner. I saw the strangeness of this way of life slowly as I began to gain a greater sense of how most people in my life lived. They, their parents, and their grandparents all lived in suburban homes, worked nine to five jobs. My grandparents have lived a life which, as I have found, few could so much as hope to want to live. They do not consider themselves to be free agents of potential, waiting to build, invent, or restructure their lives for the sake of convenience, fame, or wealth. They are willing and equipped to live where they are, no matter the difficulty. My grandparents are willing to trust the ground in which God planted them and so be nourished by that land.

Seeing and living in a different way, having been formed by my grandparents, I have been equipped to see the vicissitudes and deracination of modern society through clear eyes. Virtue takes the long view of patience and rootedness. I have seen and lived a bit of what it is to live with longsuffering, loving and making a life with those neighbors given not chosen or demanded.

In the proceeding collection, I have written and collected two essays along with a commonplace of the most valuable quotations I have encountered in my reading for this project.



The first essay is entitled, “Skepticism Unchecked: Building our Christian Memory on the Sand.” In it I discuss my experience in college where I have over and over again found an environment of skepticism and problematizing among Christian peers who have not been formed to have prudence and faith of intellect. The second essay is “Virtue and the Apocalypse” in which I discuss the trend of apocalyptic climate change activism that seeks to inspire change by fear instead of the slow cultivation of virtue. Finally, I collected quotes from a variety of sources and thinkers who have guided my thinking. Because this project is not meant for the narrow audience of academia but for a wider audience, this commonplace will be of more use to a reader than a reader as a guide to the soil that nourished anything worthwhile I have written.

## **II. Skepticism Unchecked**

### *Building our Christian Memory on the Sand*

Sitting in a Theology class on the third floor of the humanities building, you can see the tops of the trees that remain after the college recently expanded its parking lots. I could see the deciduous trees, mostly sycamores, breaking into color as my professor was discussing the potential dangers of having a religious government. He mentioned that the Christian governments, following Constantine's conversion, committed great atrocities all while acting in the name of the true faith and Jesus Christ. Several examples were mentioned, chiefly the anti-Semitic movements throughout Europe's history in which thousands were expelled, abused, and murdered by Christians who, evidently, had lost the pre-Constantinian love of peace once given the sword of government.

The class reacted with universal and somber agreement, and for a while, this was appropriate because Christians have certainly failed in many areas. Recognizing the flaws in particular ways is an essential part of understanding and the only way to improve for the future. Soon, however, it became clear that this sort of criticism was the only thing most students in this class really knew about Christian history. Some started by mentioning the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. Others mentioned that Christian kings and emperors were corrupt and violent, embroiling their subjects in war and conflict. Finally, some students began to suggest that it might have been better for Christians to continue under pagan Roman rule, dying brutal deaths in the arena. They would rather have Constantine, when he heard the words, "In this sign you will conquer," at Milvian Bridge, abdicate the throne on the spot rather than do violence as a Christian. For my classmates, better that Christians stay weak and uninfluential than risk causing harm themselves by taking the reins of political authority.

Reflecting on this, I began to shift uncomfortably in my seat. This class of life-long Christians who grew up attending Church, learning the Scriptures, and even had chosen to attend a faithful college which seeks to form “Christian men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith,” knew next to nothing of their history. After all this time of Christian formation, my classmates knew only a few perfunctory descriptions of the failings of their forefathers and mothers in the faith. There was no mention that hospitals, orphanages, and universities exist today as part of the legacy of Christian governance and society. Not only this, but there was also no knowledge of the fact that the expectation for how people ought to be treated changed radically: women gained unprecedented freedoms and dignity, and, for the first time in world history, slavery was radically changed or, in some cases, brought to an end. This is not to mention the many Christian movements throughout history that have shaped the world for the better. Examples range from the “Peace of God” movement in the Middle Ages, in which huge numbers of common people worked together to convince rulers all over Europe to limit the scale and prevalence of warfare, to the Abolitionist movement in America. All this was made possible by the rule of Christians working within a society operating with the basic assumptions and structure of Christ’s way of love.

Now, those who have encountered this more complete vision of Christian history will know that my classmates went seriously wrong. Such a one-sided narrative, focusing on only the failures of those Christians who came before us, ignores the facts on the ground for millions of people over the course of a millennium and misrepresents their contributions as mere ignorant oppression. It ignores the significant good done by so many Christians, even those with money and political power, to help the downtrodden and oppressed. Still more, since these societies were made up of Christians, it seems that the only choice these people had was to start ruling themselves if they did not want their whole society to collapse or be invaded by others who would

gladly renew the prevalence of slavery, infanticide, and the rest. Even though Christian leadership does not mean there will not be difficulties and vicious leaders, the choice is still between a government that might do far more good than another. Importantly, this is a moment that requires one to break out of the mold of all right or all wrong. It is the sort of decision that requires one to discern that some parts of some things are really better or worse than another.

Midway through the class, this one-dimensional criticism prodded me to speak up. I mentioned that the Roman Empire eventually became a society of Christians forced to choose if they wanted to continue the brutal regime of war and violent oppression or the alternative – to try and rule for themselves where they might do better job. These people, who found themselves seeking a way of Christian governance, certainly did not succeed on every account, and many who participated were not as faithful as they ought to have been, but in this case, it is hard to fathom that Christian critics from afar might have done more good than those enacting imperfect solutions. In other words, these Christians were to decide between their own imperfect rule or the deplorable rule by a pagan empire. After hearing this, some classmates were quite interested in the idea that Christian societies had made such a contribution and mentioned that they had not encountered the matter in this light before.

How might these highly educated Christians, after roughly fifteen years of schooling and two decades attending Church, fundamentally misunderstand the history and legacy of their own faith? Notably, we have come to a juncture in education, even at a Christian college, where presenting a positive vision of something before problematizing it is out of fashion. There is a lack of interest in form or structure and a fixation with criticism and showing things to be “problematic.” It is no longer considered valuable to discuss a what is or might be done with excellence. Each of these students, who had grown up in this deracinated culture, came to a Christian college and found a continued lack of education on these matters. Without a notion of

the basic facts of the matter, students are asked and encouraged to jump into criticism. For instance, each student is required to read one and only one common essay discussing Christian history during their Christian Liberal Arts education. The following is a passage by theologian Bruce Birch in which he makes the claim that, from early on, Christians adopted a framework of hierarchical oppression, based in their failed reading of the Scriptures and cultural norms. This hierarchy, he says, quashed the egalitarian and communal living which Christ initiated. He says:

Early in the history of the Christian church a subdivided hierarchy became the standard: God, males, females, other races than white, Jews, animals, plants, and the earth itself. This hierarchical understanding of creation became the foundation for entire superstructures of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism.

As evidence, Birch selects a few historically abstracted examples, such as the acceptance of slavery by American Christians, and moves on.

Apparently, in the little that contemporary Christian pastors and professors have taught their students, the focus has been exclusively on failures to live up to the ideal. All of these Christians in history, ones whose lives and work the likes of Birch depend to even write his theological work, can be dismissed as only a failure to live up to the egalitarian dreams of Christ. Birch does not go so far explicitly, but his appalling neglect of historical complexity and his limited focus could only leave the otherwise historically ignorant student to assume that nearly all historic Christians were part of an evil and oppressive hierarchy. This is the sort of historical understanding that arises from an education which is unable to present a constructive vision. Students are taught to criticize, but when it comes to presenting a vision of what has been done well or what ought to be, there is no good structure, framework, or guidance. Following the trends of modern thought, we have bought into the fantasy that we have surpassed the old ways and that we can look to the past to learn only what failures to avoid, instead of learning from the

positive foundation of our ancestors. The primary target of this culture of doubt is directed in particular at those who hold political power. The Marxist assumption that power, no matter the quality of its possessor, corrupts absolutely, has become the new orthodoxy. This puts the Christian ruler in same category as any other power and does not allow for the possibility of a Christian to overcome the patterns of corruption. It prevents an understanding of the real distinctions and nuance present in history, rendering students formed in this tradition unable to sift through historic events and people, and make honest judgements not wholesale condemnations. These people and events were complex. Simply condemning based on one facet, illumined by hindsight, does not do justice to these towering figures who made valuable contributions, which we depend on even now, often to such a degree that we take these good things for granted.

This spirit of criticism has consistently failed to recognize and appreciate real goods in Christian rule and authority. For instance, during the rule of Henry VIII in England, the monasteries were criticized for their corruption, wealth, and power. This criticism was used as grounds to disassemble every monastery in England in the great Dissolution of the Monasteries. For context, there were so many monasteries at the time that an estimated one-third of England's lands were owned by monastic institutions. For the eager reformer, this massive Church institution was betraying its own mission by its power and wealth. Yet, when every last monastery in England was forcefully confiscated by the government and sold off or destroyed, the idealists were proven unwise. Priceless manuscripts and architectural feats were destroyed along with a long-developed framework for a good life. Thousands of monastics were thrown out of their homes and enterprising secular landlords acquired Church lands, often making life there unaffordable for the poor tenant farmers. This led to mass unemployment and landlessness. Unfortunately, the monasteries were the center of charitable work in England too, so the Church

networks designed to help the poor were no longer available. The simplistic judgments and the refusal to admit the potential of a successful monastic rule was far more destructive than any corrupt monastery could have dreamed of being. The sort of criticism, fostered in young Christians today, is not unlike that of these English reformers. There is a certain vicious impulse being cultivated that prevents an honest look at the complex but invaluable benefits of a system along with its failures.

There is a saddening sense of despair in settling for simplistic judgments. The cultural formation of young Christians is such that they have been rooted in shallow soil. They are left without an understanding of their history or a hope of overcoming the patterns of this world. Yet, if this is not bad enough, coming to a Christian college is unlikely to improve the outlook of these students. That afternoon, the sun pouring through the plate glass windows, we had another discussion in my history class regarding the use of documents and other historical sources. We had read the work of one researcher who wrote at length to define the challenges of knowing historical truth given the fact that the people who wrote them and the reader in the modern world are both unable to see clearly without personal bias. This is an important point, to a certain extent. We think and are predisposed as we are trained to do so by our community and other influences. We inherit intuitions, and sometimes even when we are reacting against someone's framing of a historic period we are still doing so. Because of this tendency toward habitual gestures of the mind it is helpful to take a closer look at our heritage and not simplistically presume based on these gestures and the spirit of our age.

All people contend with the reality of an historic event apart from our particular inherited mindset and bias, which are extant in all humanity, and present an important quandary not easily answered. What I heard in this history class, though, was this principle of caution perverted. The philosophical position endorsed by our professor, the more advanced students,

and the texts we read was that the problem of personal bias is so serious we can never know if we have found any truth. At first glance, this might seem like an admirable bit of intellectual humility and prudence from the world of high academia. Yet, this is not humility, it is a sort of the pridefulness which hides under the pretense of personal goodness: “I am not biased because I admit my bias.” To accept the claim that we can only see our biased view, not truth, is to consent to a positively incoherent and illogical claim under the façade of wisdom and honesty.

This position is, by its own standards, self-defeating. If we cannot see beyond our biases, how can we see that the principle of bias is true? If our vision is really so clouded, what good would it do to learn the history at all from a professor in an overpriced private university? What good would it do to study it at all? But still, our professor said we must continue this Sisyphean task – pushing our boulders up the hill, reading dusty manuscripts even though we only really “learn” what we are predisposed to learn by our society. We might think we are making progress, but this is simply what we have been taught to think. This mockery of education seems not unrelated to the decline of humanities departments all over America.

With this skeptical style, my classmates in theology class questioned the ability of the powerful, even Christians, to rule without violence because they have been formed to think of the powerful as inevitably corrupt. I and others who question this view and say that there were tangible benefits to the rule of Christians only say this because we have been formed to trust the powerful. According to the skeptical historian, none of us can know the real facts of the matter or answer the question, “Was it good for Christians to come to power?” Is it any wonder that our generation lacks knowledge and falls prey to debunking whatever it thinks it might know about its own tradition at every turn? Even if one of my classmates had looked for answers from a professor or historical expert, in all likelihood they would have been told that they can never know the truth. This is certainly no incentive to seek out an answer or learn a particular body of



knowledge.

The central problem with this skeptical mindset is that it is only negative. It can only speak of vice, error, oppression, lies, and falsehood. It is merely critical. Obviously, criticism is valuable in every area of life. Without it, the world could not be bettered, error and vice would be overlooked, and people would live lives in unchecked oppression. Yet, if something is actually to be improved once everyone agrees that there is a problem, there must also be agreement on the way the thing ought to be when it is fixed. When we criticize, the next question is naturally, “Why ought this be criticized - in what way is this wrong?” Answering this question requires one have a positive vision – some notion of what is really right. This is true for the most basic and the most complex. For someone to say that the milk has gone bad requires him to know what the milk is like when it is fresh. For someone to say that a government is oppressive means that she has some idea of what the right sort of government is. This is because negation and criticism are ways of saying that something is not the right or ideal thing. To say, “The milk is sour,” is to say, “The milk unlike fresh milk.” To say, “The government is oppressive,” is the same thing as saying, “The government has failed to ensure the proper freedom.” Left without hope of a standard, our generation lacks the ability to criticize properly and runs the risk of study marked by total despair.

Criticism is saying that something has missed the bullseye. If the critic knows that something has missed its mark, he must know where that mark is or what it is like. Otherwise, the response is all too simple: “How do you know I am wrong if you do not even know what it means to be right? What rule did I violate? What mold did I break?” Unfortunately, though, it is difficult to understand or express this mark in so many of the most important cases. The mark need not be fully explicit for the critic to start making general criticisms, but it does for the thing being criticized to be improved. The ability to see the mark requires one to possess virtue, chiefly

prudence, in order to sift through the complexities of life and know when one has found the mark. As Matthew Milliner so nicely summarizes,

[P]rudence is the “intelligent prow of our nature,” which puts us in touch with reality. For the classical moral tradition reason is less the restricted faculty bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment than it is our “gateway to reality,” and prudence is how reason transforms knowledge of reality into decisive action in realizing the good.

Prudence is cultivated over time so that the mind is able to have “infinite suppleness” to patiently consider and sift all the facets of an issue and see what is lasting and true. The person who has been formed to be prudent is equipped to criticize as well as to understand. She can see the difficulties and conflicts of Christian history with clear eyes while not losing sight of what is real and good. Prudence allows for honest, disciplined analysis rather than sweeping dismissal because it allows our intellect to see the complexity of a life, an event, or history itself as layered with good and evil things that do not fit neatly into simplistic frameworks of Marxist power struggles.

Yet, prudence is insufficient. Along with it, for learners and even teachers to be equipped for the intellectual work of analysis, they must also acquire and be given the virtue of faith: belief that some right action or knowledge is possible so that anything besides cynicism can emerge. One can criticize based on an ill-defined or vague notion, but without the knowledge of the end goal that faith provides, there is little hope for finding a path by prudence. Even if all anyone talks about is the problems in a government and everyone agrees that these are the problems, the government is no better off if none have a clear idea of what a good government ought to be like or that a good government is possible. All one can do is continue to spawn the general feeling of dissatisfaction.

The really devious problem with this academic skepticism about our capacity to know the truth is that it wants to have its cake and eat it too. The historian insists upon our inability to know the truth about history given that we are biased by our own personal and limited perspective. That is, he insists, contrary to reason, that we can know for certain that we cannot know anything for certain. At the same time, he does seem to hold some notion, even a vague one, of the truth of the matter since he considers himself to really be saying that the biased perspective missed the mark of truth. For instance, if a new manuscript or other bit of evidence was uncovered, he might suggest that this really does change or improve our ability to know what the truth is. To even enter the historical debate and honestly answer with anything except, “I have no idea,” is to, at least implicitly, have some sort of knowledge of what the truth of the matter is. Still, perplexingly he continues to fixate on the criticisms and failures of things built.

Working toward a positive vision takes a great deal of time and study along with clear eyed prudence and faith. We must have the prudence to honestly weigh the knowledge given to us and the faith to hold to the final light over what is obscured in the present darkness. The lack of these virtues is the beginning of a very long road marked by pompous self-deception and ending in despair and ignorance. Teachers who have not done the work of shaping their students in prudence and faith are responsible for the inevitable disillusionment of their pupils. Students too bear responsibility for their contentment with such a lack of knowledge. Both bear responsibility for the present condescension.

To be clear, the fundamental problem is not so much the lack of historical knowledge, though it is not unrelated. The real problem is that so many times my classmates and I are not taught by either the Christian or the educational cultures of the day to understand things in a constructive way, with the light of faith. The only mode of thought praised is pithy debunking – criticism without positive understanding.

For the Christian student seeking to understand the legacy of her religious forbearers, she might seek to understand what their lives were actually like, what stories they told, and what work they did. Only after understanding the structure of what these people contributed is it reasonable to judge their life and work. This way of understanding is difficult, time consuming, and risky in the current atmosphere of proprietary self-righteousness; but it is not impossible. One such Christian scholar, David Bentley Hart, has sought this virtuous understanding of Christian history.

In reflecting on the critics of Christianity throughout history in his unfortunately titled book, *Atheist Delusions*, Hart points out that it is a strange feature of modern society that people charge Christianity as a force of oppression for powerless and rejected peoples. Many true critics of Christianity up until recently, such as Nietzsche, were in agreement that Christian society and life is a failure precisely on account of its acceptance of human weakness – encouraging meekness and martyrdom and accepting death without complaint rather than warriors and heroes worthy of fame. Today the claim among American and European intelligentsia is that Christianity is a religion of oppression. Certainly, people who would call themselves Christians have done horrible things. Yet, this is hardly unique in the history of the world which is teeming with slavery, oppression of women, and attacks on outsiders. What is remarkable about Christians is that they have often broken with the patterns of this world, liberating slaves rather than selling them and treating women justly. Further, as Hart makes clear, the very arguments of the contemporary critic of Christianity betray the fact that Christianity has made a radical contribution to the good of the world. Before Christianity, the expectation that a religion might seek the ultimate telos of self-giving love and eternal peace was not an option. Christianity provided the hope of true justice and love which are the very concepts that the critics appeal to when accusing Christianity. Christians often fail to meet these lofty ideals, but it is Christianity

that made this understanding possible.

In Hart's synthesis of Christian history, he is careful not to make generalized claims of superiority. His praise and criticism consider the breadth of history, but he is also willing to point to moments of lasting good. He demonstrates both the prudence to sift the facts of the history of Christianity while clearly having faith that real change and understanding can occur – that something besides brute political power can call people to live better lives. With demonstrable virtue, Hart is able to show the lasting foundation of Christian history, a concept so detested by some, but that might very well be true.

In my own education and formation, I have indeed encountered examples of those skeptics and ill-founded critics who are unable to see what is enduring and good in our world and our history. That being said, they are by no means the only intellects I have encountered. There is much hope for even those lacking prudence and faith, who have never been taught what rich soil is just below the dry and weary land which they have been instructed not to penetrate. In the language, songs, ideas, and all the works of lasting value so readily available to those who know to look, there exists a treasure trove anticipating those who long for it. A seaside awaits those who have only been given a mudpuddle.

### **III. Virtue and the Apocalypse**

Since coming to college in the fall of 2019, it has become common to encounter friends who live in despair and deep fear of an impending climate apocalypse. It seems that the despair arises each time the weather is unusual or someone notices litter on the roadsides. Someone has always just finished the latest documentary about new disastrous statistics or government misstep. Indeed, the barrage of horrid information is enough to make even the most optimistic people worried. The news is grim; and my climate concerned friends' responses are equally so. Like the flagellants during the Black Plague, they go forth energized by fear to live radically ascetic lives, dreading the emissions of factories and childbirth alike. These friends respond by embracing the fear and despair of the apocalypse as motivation. They try and wield statistics in order to fundamentally change the behavior of whole nations. In their minds, if we can convince people that things are going to really disastrous, people will be more likely to change their behavior.

Having lived in this environment for several years, I was not at all surprised to hear that, in September of 2019, in every major city, young people like my friends who are so concerned about the future of the climate took to the streets to speak to those in power. The coordinated series of events was meant specifically for the youth, the future of the planet, to speak to its fathers and mothers and ask them to take action to reduce emissions in a last-ditch effort to slow the mounting calamity of climate change. Leading these groups of protesters was a Swedish teenager, Greta Thunberg, a well-known activist. On its face, this effort does not look like anything all that unusual or improper in a country that value the free exchange of ideas.

There are many such protest movements in the world. They look to the example of Gandhi's work for Indian freedom, Apartheid, and the American Civil Rights movement as exemplars and take to the streets lead by a brave and charismatic face for the effort. Yet, there is

something different about this effort. While other movements pursued freedom from oppression and demand rights for a future of liberty, these protests spoke a bit differently. The best way to characterize the rhetoric is to call them apocalyptic. The forefathers of peaceful protest demanded change for the sake of justice and freedom, these climate protests ask for change because the end is nigh. Dr. King spoke of a dream of justice and love, reconciliation between divided peoples. The climate protesters of today bear signs reading, “The end is near!” and “Why are you trying to kill us?” These are accompanied by others such as, “You will die of old age, your children will die of climate change.” and “It’s not too late, until it’s too late.” Rather than Sit-ins, this movement features “Die-ins,” in which people pretend to die of climate change in mass.

Amid this movement, Greta Thunberg gave a speech to United Nations leaders in which this style of cataclysmic rhetoric was. The young woman, hailed as the spokeswoman for an entire generation, chastised the world leaders who had invited her, exclaiming,

People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you? ... You are failing us, but young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you and if you choose to fail us, I say, we will never forgive you.

The conversation around Climate Change, for good or ill, has taken on the language of doomsday. The closest comparison might be with the fears and movements to stop nuclear war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The language assumes impending doom like those who assumed that American and the USSR were bound for nuclear war. It criticizes, accuses, and expounds on the future of gloom. This climate movement makes no promises of future survival and certainly not of future happiness. It does not present a vision for a way of life that might be better, it only speaks of a life that has a lower chance of ending in the destruction of all human life. A recent study even found that about a third of young Americans find the risk of Climate Change to be a

factor in choosing to have less children.

In this age of consumerism, in which nearly every person on the planet is besieged by the call to buy, spend, devour, and acquire, it is a strange thing to hear someone calling, like one of the desert hermits of the ancient world, to use less and sacrifice personal pleasure for something greater. In an uneasy mirror image to the ascetic calls for poverty, chastity, and stability, the environmentalist calls for frugality, sterility, and localism. These activists make bold claims of radicle action, but in order to flee from something.

To be clear, I do not make this comparison to pass a judgment on the scientific research regarding climate change. I have no expertise in these scientific issues and will not here pretend to have any. I mention it because this movement acts with a notably different motivation from previous activist campaigns. The one type of movement speaks of change for the sake of a better existence while the other speaks of change for fear of the apocalypse, not necessarily because those changes will produce a better way of living. Regardless of the scientific facts of the matter that, if true, do suggest that a great deal of concern is appropriate, I am concerned that this way of encouraging change has become the dominate strategy among my peer. When they hear of a problem, they turn to guilt and fear in order to inspire a change. This method is concerning because it is founded on a misunderstanding of what really inspires change and betrays a lack of a positive vision in my generation. Over and again – in all areas of life but particularly with regards to the climate – my peers show themselves to be without a positive vison for what a good life is actually like. They speak only of what is wrong and fearful in the world and are firm in their good but incomplete conviction that we ought prevent what is wrong.

Speaking of the right or good way to live life has become notably unfashionable in our society. We struggle to stomach any suggestion that there is a right and a wrong way. Yet, in the face of our doom, we might still decide to conform out behavior to what might save us from



death. Of course, the motivation from fear can obviously work in some cases, but those cases are typically momentary changes – to run from the threat or turn and fight. Unfortunately for us, fear seems unlikely to be a source of long term change because big changes require long-term effort. True improvement is deeper, slower, and based on a vision for a positive way of life, not the inevitable death of everything. Telling someone not to be bad is not helpful if they do not first know what it means to be good. Vice is a deprivation of virtue. Virtue is fullness and excellence. The critic says that the object of his criticism lacks such excellence.

In the absence of a vision for a good life, we need some sort of apocalypse in order to have a meaningful life because fear forces us to, at least implicitly, accept the value of being and doing (the opposite of nothingness and doom). This being and doing is something that is fuller and more excellent than nothingness for the human. We are at our most excellent when we live and do things. We really fear the nothingness when we do not have anything to push us to what we really desire – fullness, excellence, and life. Unfortunately, beyond the base avoidance of utter doom, we moderns do not have the direction to seek fullness. We live lives that are authentically indolent and barren. We can question God and all his angels like even the best of accusers. Yet, we are left with the certainty that the apocalypse is worth, at least in theory and policy, avoiding.

The fear of climate change pushes people who might otherwise be morally indifferent to come face to face with the abyss. When these people see the darkness ahead, they turn and realize that being is worth something. That is why they seek to overcome the impending apocalypse. Avoidance of disaster is not excellence; although it might be necessary for those who are lost and full of despair. The tradition of virtue gives a more thorough picture of how we might seek fullness. For one, the tradition calls us to seek temperance – the ability to live with moderation not consumerist extravagance. The way of virtue gives hope of happiness and goodness both because it allows us to live with the moderation appropriate for our lives. We

might form ourselves to be the sort of people not dependent on a culture of waist and rampant consumerism, but rather to be people who are happy with enough. Encountering this understanding of virtue might allow my peers to see that there is a framework for a good life, not just the avoidance of a bad one. It might encourage more people to avoid the apocalypse because there is some hope of worthwhile life without the current comforts of extravagance.

## V. Project Commonplace

The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad./ Turn again our captivity, O Lord, as the streams in the south./ They that sow in tears shall reap in joy./ He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

– Psalm 126:3-6

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The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

– Isaiah 40:3-5

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If riches be a possession to be desired in this life; what is richer than wisdom, that worketh all things? And if prudence work; who of all that are is a more cunning workman than she? And if a man love righteousness her labours are virtues: for she teacheth temperance and prudence, justice and fortitude: which are such things, as men can have nothing more profitable in their life.

– Wisdom 8:5-7

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But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

– Galatians 3:23-26

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But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

– I Corinthians 13:10-13

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Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant. ... Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. ... But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. ... But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked. That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.

– I Corinthians 12 (excerpts)

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Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

– II Corinthians 5:16-19

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According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall

neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

– II Peter 1:3-11

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St. Thomas at the end of his life, overcome by this sense of the mystery of the All, answered Brother Reginald who was urging him to write: “Reginald, I can no more: all that I have written seems to me but straw.” Let us not have the presumption to wish that this lofty despair should come to us too soon: it is a reward; it is the silence preceding the great cry with which the whole soul will vibrate in the flood of light revealed; but a little of that awe is the best corrective for the pride that blinds and the pretensions that mislead us. Besides, it stimulates us to work, for distant lights attract us as long as we have the hope of reaching them. On the contrary, if we think that everything has been said and that we have only to learn, we work in a little circle and stick fast in the same spot.

A noble character knows that our lights are only the degrees of shadow by which we climb toward the inaccessible light. We stammer, and the enigma of the world remains unsolved. Study means specifying a few conditions, classifying a few facts; great and fruitful study comes only from putting the little we achieve under the favoring discretion of what we do not yet know. That does not mean consigning it to darkness; for it is light we do not see that best sustains the dim reflections of our astral night.

Mystery is in all things the light of what we know; just as unity is the source of number, and immobility the secret of the dizziest speed. To perceive in oneself the murmur of all being and all duration, to appeal to their witness, is, in spite of their silence, to assure oneself the best guarantees for the acquisition of truth. Everything is linked with everything, and the clearly visible relations of things have their roots in the night into which I am groping my way.

– A.G. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*, pp. 142-143

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The more the necessities of life weigh us down with all their constraints, the more does society tend to free itself from all taboos, and the general atmosphere to express a secret revolt. Is the modern world for or against man? The biological rhythm of rural civilizations regulated by the sun gives way to the technical rhythm of invading and massive urbanization. Life in a world of factories and laboratories is no longer organic; it is organized. Its reinforced concrete very rapidly kills the sense of living nature. Even the simplest materials used in the administration of the sacraments— water, bread, wax, fire— are disappearing from natural use in homes, or are so falsified as to be no longer the familiar and known representation of the cosmos. Thus liturgical

symbolism is not appreciated; the ritual no longer says anything spontaneously. It requires a very laborious initiation. The coming generations are more and more strangers to sacred symbols. Modern symbolism takes refuge in insignia and groups of capital letters. Words are dehydrated and the most familiar objects seem to have lost their first meaning. We see in modern churches candles surmounted by an electric bulb, a hybrid which we do not know how to name.

– Paul Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God*, pp.46-47

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In present conditions, under the burden of overwork and the wear on nerves, sensibility is changing. Medicine protects and prolongs life, but at the same time it lowers resistance to suffering and privations. Christian asceticism is only a method in the service of life, and it will seek to adapt itself to the new needs. At Thebaid extreme fasts and constraints were imposed; today the combat is not the same. Man has no need of supplementary pain; hair shirts, chains, flagellations would run the risk of uselessly breaking him. Mortification could be the liberation from every kind of opiates— speed, noise, alcohol, and all kinds of stimulants. Rather, the asceticism could be necessary rest, the discipline of regular periods of calm and silence, when man could regain his ability to stop for prayer and contemplation, even in the heart of all the noises of the world; and he could then listen to the presence of others. The fast, as opposed to the maceration of the flesh inflicted on himself, could be his renunciation of the superfluous, his sharing with the poor and his smiling equilibrium. The modalities of asceticism, like the faces of the saints, reflect the age. How symptomatic it is that in a world bowed down under the weight of cares, St. Therese speaks of spiritual childhood, traces her “little way”, and invites all to sit down at “the table of sinners”. Depth psychology for its part draws attention to the transcendence of humility and to the incarnations of the spiritual in social life. Modern asceticism sees itself in the service of the human that has been assumed in the incarnation; it is violently opposed to any lessening or abdication of man.

– Paul Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God*, pp. 47-48

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Thou hast been cultivated by God, becoming an honored and pious husbandman. The sheaves of virtue thou hast gathered unto thyself, O George; for having sowed with tears thou didst reap with joy; and didst struggle unto blood, attaining Christ. ... In his longing for Christ the King, who laid down His life for the life of the world, this soldier, the great George, strove diligently to die for His sake; for having divine zeal in his heart, he offered himself up.

– From the Kontakion and Oikos hymns for St. George

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... Do we really think Gorbachov was more likely to have a nuclear tantrum than Saddam Hussein or Khadafy or some other tin-bagged despot?

...

There are only two roads that lead away from the edge of the nuclear abyss. They are the road of ignorance and the road of knowledge. The road of ignorance is the ignorance of the facts about how to make nuclear bombs. That road is closed forever. The only other road is the road of knowledge – moral knowledge, knowledge of moral virtue that would make it unthinkable ever to use these weapons. That road is still open, and is the subject of this book.

Our cult of novelty has brought us to the brink of suicide. Modern Western man cultivates risk and revolution. He scorns the traditional, the tried and true. That is one of the reasons the supreme novelty of nuclear holocaust looms so hideously possible on our horizon.

Walker Percy says there is one thing that secretly terrifies us even more than life with a nuclear war: life with no nuclear war.

A friend of mine recently taught a course to some bright prep school students on the problem of nuclear war. [This was before 1989.] The students were highly motivated and fascinated with the question. At the end of the course most of them had come to believe that there will *not* be a nuclear war. What do you think their reaction was? Joy? Relief? No. Shock, an empty look, and a deeper subtler terror than the fear of death. The terror not at physical nothingness, but at spiritual nothingness. “What do we do now?” The existential vacuum!

The feeling must have been like that of the early Seventh Day Adventists whose lives had been geared to the world’s ending on a certain date and when the date passed, they found themselves still here. What now?

It is a simple question but an awful one. What now? For behind its horizons looms a face more hideous even than that of the mushroom cloud: the face of The Nothing: Nihilism.

What can fill The Nothing? What is its opposite, its opponent, its conqueror?

Being fills it. Being human fills The Nothing. Getting on with the business of life answers the question, What now?

But what *is* it to be human? What is the business of life? Our primary business of life is not business, or construction work, or sales, or teaching, or even motherhood, but becoming a complete human being. But what is that?

There used to be maps, diagrams, pictures of a complete human being. A very large part of those old maps were about virtues and vices, good and bad qualities of character and life. But the old maps have fallen into disuse.

– P. Kreeft, “After Virtue,” pp. 14-15

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Among all things, however disparate,  
there reigns an order, and this gives the form  
that makes the universe resemble God...  
and in this order all created things,  
according to their bent, maintain their place,  
disposed in proper distance from their Source...  
Not only living creatures void of reason  
prove the impelling strength of instinct’s bow,  
but also those with intellect and love.

– from Dante’s *Paradiso*, Canto I

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As to virtue leading us to a happy life, I hold virtue to be nothing else than perfect love of God. For the fourfold division of virtue I regard as taken from four forms of love. For these four virtues (would that all felt their influence in their minds as they have their names in their mouths!), I should have no hesitation in defining them: that temperance is love giving itself entirely to that which is loved; fortitude is love readily bearing all things for the sake of the loved object; justice is love serving only the loved object, and therefore ruling rightly; prudence is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it. The object of this love is not anything, but only God, the chief good, the highest wisdom, the perfect harmony. So we may express the definition thus: that temperance is love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God; fortitude is love bearing everything readily for the sake of God; justice is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man; prudence is love making a right distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it.

– St. Augustine of Hippo, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, 15.25