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PIETY AND JUSTICE

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**Let parents, then, bequeath to their children not riches,
but the spirit of reverence. —PLATO, Laws**

Part 1 of 2

The third and last stage of our journey back brings us within sight of the fair goal of Justice. We have explained how man must establish himself in relation to property, and we have outlined a means to repair communication. We now approach a crowning concept which governs his attitude toward the totality of the world.

I realize the risk one incurs in using language associated with forces popularly discredited, but I see no way to sum up the offense of modern man except to say that he is impious. I shall endeavor, to compensate by giving the word some rather concrete applications. First of all, I would maintain that modern man is a parricide. He has taken up arms against, and he has effectually slain, what former men have regarded with filial veneration. He has not been conscious of crime but has, on the contrary—and certainly this is nothing new to students of human behavior—regarded his action as a proof of virtue.

It is highly significant to learn that when Plato undertakes a discussion of the nature of piety and impiety, he chooses as interlocutor a young man who is actually bent upon parricide. Euthyphro, a youth filled with arrogant knowledge and certain that he understands “what is dear to the gods,” has come to Athens to prosecute his father for murder. Struck by the originality of this proceeding, Socrates questions him in the usual fashion. His conclusion is that piety, which consists of co-operation with the gods in the kind of order they have instituted, is part of the larger concept of justice. It can be added that the outcome of the dialectic does not encourage the prosecution. The implication is that Euthyphro has no right, out of his partial and immature knowledge, to proceed contemptuously against an ancient relationship.

In our contemporary setting the young man stands for science and technology, and the father for the order of nature. For centuries now we have been told that our happiness requires an unrelenting assault upon this order; dominion, conquest, triumph—all these names have been used as if it were a military campaign. Somehow the notion has been loosed that nature is hostile to man or that her ways are offensive or slovenly, so that every step of progress is measured by how far we have altered these. Nothing short of a recovery of the ancient virtue of pietas can absolve man from this sin.

The prevailing attitude toward nature is that form of heresy which denies substance and, in so doing, denies the rightfulness of creation. We have said—to the point of repletion, perhaps—that man is not to take his patterns from nature; but neither is he to waste himself in seeking to change her face. I do not think we have a contradiction here, the desideratum being a sort of respectful nonattachment.

The modern position seems only another manifestation of egotism, which develops when man has reached a point at which he will no longer admit the right to existence of things not of his own contriving. From somewhere in his self-centered being he brings plans

which he would truculently impose. The true religion, it is said, is service to mankind; but this service seems to take the form of securing for him an unconditional victory over nature. Now this attitude is impious, for, as has been noted, it violates the belief that creation or nature is fundamentally good, that the ultimate reason for its laws is a mystery, and that acts of defiance such as are daily celebrated by the newspapers are subversive of cosmos. Obviously a degree of humility is required to accept this view.

On the other hand, it is the nature of unlimited egotism to deny any source of right ordering outside itself. It is a state of belligerence toward the nonself, and who will say that this is not the root of all those envies and aggrandizements which make people feel that today justice has departed from the world?

Piety is a discipline of the will through respect. It admits the right to exist of things larger than the ego, of things different from the ego. And, before we can bring harmony back into a world where now everything seems to meet “in mere oppugnancy,” we shall have to regard with the spirit of piety three things: nature, our neighbors—by which I mean all other people—and the past. I propose to take these up in turn.

By nature I mean simply the substance of the world. It is a matter of elementary observation that nature reflects some kind of order which was here before our time and which, even after atomic fission, defies our effort at total comprehension. The wise student of her still says modestly with the soothsayer in *Antony and Cleopatra*, “In nature’s infinite book of secrecy a little I can read.” And the philosopher still maintains that substance, though open to abuse, is not in its nature evil. We are more successfully healed by the *vis medicatrix naturae* than by the most ingenious medical application. We get increasing evidence under the regime of science that to meddle with small parts of a machine of whose total design and purpose we are ignorant produces evil consequences. Thus “natural evil,” put out the front door by science, re-enters at the back door, sometimes with renewed potency for harm. Triumphs against the natural order of living exact unforeseen payments. At the same time that man attempts to straighten a crooked nature, he is striving to annihilate space, which seems but another phase of the war against substance. We ignore the fact that space and matter are shock absorbers; the more we diminish them the more we reduce our privacy and security. Our planet is falling victim to a rigorism, so that what is done in any remote corner affects—nay, menaces—the whole. Resiliency and tolerance are lost. What an anxiety neurosis has the airplane brought into the world! With piety gone, every great invention proves shortsighted.

And here we must confront the paradox that this continual warring upon nature is not a sign of superiority to her; it is a proof of pre-occupation with nature, of a sort of imprisonment by her. Thus the lion woos his bride! Those who endlessly try to subdue nature offer evidence that they are caught in the toils of her fascination. Spiritual people do not take nature for their bride, and, by paradox again, they are often the most successful lords of her. Perry Miller has claimed that the reason the Puritans of New England, intense religious zealots, achieved better than ordinary success in both war and business was that their doctrine taught them to cultivate a “deadness to the world.” It was just this deadness to the world, a sort of distance from it, which left them freer and bolder to act than people sunk in materialism and the love of comfort. We have noted a similar analysis by De Tocqueville of religious-minded communities. This immersion in the task of reconstructing nature is an adolescent infatuation. The youth is an intellectual merely, a believer in ideas, who thinks that ideas can overcome the world. The mature man passes beyond intellectuality to wisdom; he believes in ideas, too, but life has taught him to be content to see them embodied, which is to see them under a sort of limitation. In other words, he has found that substance is a part of life, a part which is ineluctable. This humbler view of man’s powers is the essence of piety; and it is, in the long run, more rewarding, for nature seems best dealt with when we respect her without allowing ourselves to want too fiercely to possess her.

It has been mentioned that the spoiled-child psychology is encountered almost solely in those people who have abandoned nature and who have signaled this abandonment by taking flight from country to city. Turn where we will, we find that the countryman has a superior philosophic resignation to the order of things. He is less agitated by the cycle of birth and death; he frets less; he is more stable in time of crisis. He is better integrated than his city cousin because he has piety enough to accept reality, which is possibly tantamount to a belief in providence. There seems much truth in the statement by Miller that after the Puritans had lost piety, they became “unable to face reality as unflinchingly as their forefathers.” The result was that curious combination of optimism and moral impotence, discerned by students of New England culture from Vernon Parrington to John P. Marquand, which contrasts with the earlier pessimism and moral force.

Yet other peoples must say, “There but for the grace of God go I”; for this is a failure all are prone to. And this is why an essential step in retaining our hold upon the real reality is a definition of our proper relationship to nature. At one extreme is total immersion, which leaves man sentient but unreflective. At the other is total abstraction, which leads philosophically to denial of substance

(this may be symbolized by flight to the city). The latter is the way of statistics and technology. The complete acceptance of nature and the complete repudiation of her turn out to be equally pernicious; we should seek a way of life which does not merge with her by responding to her every impulse, or become fatally entangled with her by attempting a complete violation. Either of these courses has the effect of making nature central to man's destiny, through force of attraction or repulsion. Santayana has observed that we should take leave of life as Ulysses took leave of Nausicaa, blessing it but not in love with it; and I think that our attitude toward physical nature should be similar. Thus we may say of the great material world that we do not desire it chiefly but that we think it has a place in the order of things which is entitled to respect.

The second form of piety accepts the substance of other beings. It is a matter of everyday observation that people of cultivation and intellectual perceptiveness are quickest to admit a law of rightness in ways of living different from their own; they have mastered the principle that being has a right qua being. Knowledge disciplines egotism so that one credits the reality of other selves. The virtue of the splendid tradition of chivalry was that it took formal cognizance of the right to existence not only of inferiors but also of enemies. The modern formula of unconditional surrender—used first against nature and then against people impiously puts man in the place of God by usurping unlimited right to dispose of the lives of others. Chivalry was a most practical expression of the basic brotherhood of man. But to have enough imagination to see into other lives and enough piety to realize that their existence is a part of beneficent creation is the very foundation of human community. There appear to be two types to whom this kind of charity is unthinkable: the barbarian, who would destroy what is different because it is different, and the neurotic, who always reaches out for control of others, probably because his own integration has been lost. However that may be, the shortsightedness which will not grant substance to other people or other personalities is just that intolerance which finds the different less worthy. The hope of diminishing that spirit of fanaticism which threatens to rend our world depends on this concession to the nonself. I find no sign that those earnest souls who are today pleading for understanding see this connection between tolerance and piety. Not until we have admitted that personality, like nature, has an origin that we cannot account for are we likely to desist from parricide and fratricide.

The third form of piety credits the past with substance. One would think, from the frantic attempts made to cut ourselves off from history, that we aspire to a condition of collective amnesia. Let us pause long enough to remember that in so far as we are creatures

of reflection, we have only the past. The present is a line, without width; the future only a screen in our minds on which we project combinations of memory. In the interest of knowledge, then, we have every reason to remember the past as fully as we can and to realize that its continued existence in mind is positively a determinant of present actions. It has been well said that the chief trouble with the contemporary generation is that it has not read the minutes of the last meeting. Most modern people appear to resent the past and seek to deny its substance for either of two reasons: (1) it confuses them, or (2) it inhibits them. If it confuses them, they have not thought enough about it; if it inhibits them, we should look with a curious eye upon whatever schemes they have afoot. Imagination enables us to know that people of past generations lived and had their being amid circumstances just as solid as those surrounding us. And piety accepts them, their words and deeds, as part of the total reality, not to be ignored in any summing-up of experience. Are those who died heroes' and martyrs' deaths really dead? It is not an idle question. In a way, they live on as forces, helping to shape our dream of the world. The spirit of modern impiety would inter their memory with their bones and hope to create a new world out of good and ignorance.

Awareness of the past is an antidote to both egotism and shallow optimism. It restrains optimism because it teaches us to be cautious about man's perfectibility and to put a sober estimate on schemes to renovate the species. What coursebook in vanity and ambition is to be compared with Plutarch's *Lives*? What more soundly rebukes the theory of automatic progress than the measured tread of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*? The reader of history is chastened, and, as he closes his book, he may say, with Dante, in the *Inferno*:

“I had not thought death had undone so many.”

Among the Romans piety was considered a part of *aequitas*, which expressed the Platonic concept of justice, or the rendering to each his due. I have endeavored to show that something is due to nature, and to our fellow men, and to those who have passed out of temporal existence. Modern civilization, having lost all sense of obligation, is brought up against the fact that it does not know what is due to anything; consequently its affirmations grow feebler. For this reason I wish to take up next certain forms of impiety which operate as disintegrating forces. I shall follow my order and deal first with an impiety toward nature.

The last chapter from his heralded book *Ideas Have Consequences*, The University of Chicago Press.



Richard Malcolm Weaver was a noted southern American conservative scholar, now best remembered for his books *Ideas Have Consequences* and *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Through the course of his life, he was at various times a recluse, a socialist, a philosopher, a literary and cultural critic, a rhetorician, a conservative, a writer, a Platonist, and a professor at the University of Chicago. Described as “a radical and original thinker”, Weaver wrote on rhetoric, the teaching of composition, the culture of

America's south, and the problem of universals. His writings have endured and are still considerably influential, particularly in the South and with conservative theorists.

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