

PIETY AND JUSTICE

Richard M. Weaver

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

Part 2 of 2

I put forward here an instance which not only is typical of contempt for natural order but which also is of transcendent importance. This is the foolish and destructive notion of the “equality” of the sexes. What but a profound blacking-out of our conception of nature and purpose could have borne this fantasy? Here is a distinction of so basic a character that one might suppose the most frenetic modern would regard it as part of the *donnee* to be respected. What God hath made distinct, let not man confuse! But no, profound differences of this kind seem only a challenge to the busy renovators of nature. The rage for equality has so blinded the last hundred years that every effort has been made to obliterate the divergence in role, in conduct, and in dress. It has been assumed, clearly out of this same impiety, that because the mission of woman is biological in a broader way, it is less to be admired. Therefore the attempt has been to masculinize women. (Has anyone heard arguments that the male should strive to imitate the female in anything?) A social subversion of the most spectacular kind has resulted. Today, in addition to lost generations, we have a self-pitying, lost sex.

There is a social history to this. At the source of the disorder there lies, I must repeat, an impiety toward nature, but we have seen how, when a perverse decision has been made, material factors begin to exert a disproportionate effect. Woman has increasingly gone into the world as an economic “equal” and therefore competitor of man (once again equality destroys fraternity). But a superficial explanation through economic changes is to be avoided. The economic cause is a cause that has a cause. The ultimate reason

lies in the world picture, for once woman has been degraded in that picture—and putting her on a level with the male is more truly a degradation than an elevation—she is more at the mercy of economic circumstances. If we say that woman is identical with man except in that small matter of division of labor in the procreation of the species, which the most rabid egalitarian is driven to accept, there is no reason why she should not do man's work (and by extension, there is no reason why she should not be bombed along with him). So hordes of women have gone into industry and business, where the vast majority of them labor without heart and without incentive. Conscious of their displacement, they see no ideal in the task. And, in fact, they are not treated as equals; they have been made the victims of a transparent deception. Taken from a natural sphere in which they are superior, they are set to wandering between two worlds. Women can neither have the prestige of the former nor, for the fact of stubborn nature, find a real standing in the latter.

So we began to see them, these *homunculæ* of modern industrial society, swarming at evening from factories and insurance offices, going home, like the typist in *The Waste Land*, to lay out their food in tins. At length, amid the marvelous confusion of values attendant upon the second World War, came the lady, marine and the female armaments worker. It is as if the centripetal power of society had ceased. What is needed at center now drifts toward the outer edge. A social seduction of the female sex has occurred on a vast scale. And the men responsible for this seduction have been the white—slavers of business who traffic in the low wages of these creatures, the executives, the specialists in “reduction of labor costs”—the very economists and calculators whose emergence Burke predicted for us.

The anomalous phase of the situation is that the women themselves have not been more concerned to retrieve the mistake. Woman would seem to be the natural ally in any campaign to reverse this trend; in fact, it is alarming to think that her powerfully anchored defenses have not better withstood the tide of demoralization. With her superior closeness to nature, her intuitive realism, her unflinching ability to detect the sophistry in mere intellectuality, how was she ever cozened into the mistake of going modern? Perhaps it was the decay of chivalry in men that proved too much. After the gentleman went, the lady had to go too. No longer protected, the woman now has her career, in which she makes a drab pilgrimage from two-room apartment to job to divorce court.

Women of the world's *ancien regime* were practitioners of Realpolitik in this respect: they knew where the power lies. (One wonders what Queen Elizabeth would have said had feminist agitators appeared during her reign over England's green and pleasant isle.) They knew it lies in loyalty to what they are and not in imitativeness, exhibitionism, and cheap bids for attention. Well was it said that he who leaves his proper sphere shows that he is ignorant both of that which he quits and that which he enters. Women have been misled by the philosophy of activism into forgetting that for them, as custodians of the values, it is better to "be" than to "do." Maternity, after all, as Walt Whitman noted, is "an emblematical attribute."

If our society were minded to move resolutely toward an ideal, its women would find little appeal, I am sure, in lives of machine-tending and money-handling. And this is so just because woman will regain her superiority when again she finds privacy in the home and becomes, as it were, a priestess radiating the power of proper sentiment. Her life at its best is a ceremony. When William Butler Yeats in "A Prayer for My Daughter" says, "Let her think opinions are accursed," he indicts the modern displaced female, the nervous, hysterical, frustrated, unhappy female, who has lost all queenliness and obtained nothing.

What has this act of impiety brought us except, in the mordant phrase of Henry James's *The Bostonians*, an era of "long-haired men and short-haired women"?

Next, we must consider a form of impiety toward people which generally goes by the name of loss of respect for individuality. I do not think individuality a fortunate word for this conception because it signifies a cutting-off or separation, and crimes can be committed in that name. A more accurate designation would be personality, for this recognizes the irreducible character in every person and at the same time permits the idea of community.

Personality in its true definition is theomorphic. Individuality, on the other hand, may be mere eccentricity or perverseness. Individualism, with its connotation of irresponsibility, is a direct invitation to selfishness, and all that this treatise has censured can be traced in some way to individualistic mentality. But personality is that little private area of selfhood in which the person is at once conscious of his relationship to the transcendental and the living community. He is a particular vessel, but he carries some part of the universal mind. Once again it happens that when we seek to define "the final worth of the individual," as a modern phrase has

it, we find that we can reverence the spirit in man but not the spirit of man. The latter supposition was the fallacy of literary humanism. There is piety in the belief that personality, like the earth we tread on, is something given us.

It would be tedious to point out that rationalism and the machine are overwhelmingly against personality. The first is suspicious of its transcendental origin, and the second finds that personality and mechanism positively do not mix. Accordingly, the determination of our day to make all things uniform and all things public cannot forgive this last citadel of privacy. Since, after all, personality is the beginning of distinction, every figure in modern public life feels called upon to stress the regularity of his background, his habits, his aspirations. The contempt with which modern dictatorships and bureaucracies reject difference and dissent is but a brutal aspect of the same thing. Deviation from the proletarian norm bids fair to become the heresy of the future, and from this heresy there will be no court of appeal.

The plea for piety asks only that we admit the right to self-ordering of the substance of other beings. Unless this little point is granted, it is futile to talk of tolerance on a grander scale.

The most vocal part of modern impiety is the freely expressed contempt for the past. The habit is to look upon history in the same way that we look upon nature, as an unfortunate inheritance, and we struggle with equal determination to free ourselves from each. More specifically, this tendency appears in our effort to base institutions more and more on free speculation, which gives reason opportunity to expel sentiment. Now we have paid sufficient tribute to reason, but we have also insisted that the area of its profitable operation is an island in a sea of prerational sentiment. There is something to be said for George Fitzhugh's statement that "philosophy will blow up any government that is founded on it," if by philosophy we mean a purely formal inquiry into human institutions. The great proliferation of social science today seems to spring from just this fallacy; they provide us with rationales, but they are actually contemptuous of history, which gives us the three-dimensional experience of mankind. Empiricism finds it necessary to say, too, that history has not taught anything finally, for if it had, the time of trial and error would be over. But if past history has not taught anything, how will present history or future experiment?

A *pietas* toward history acknowledges that past events have not happened without law.

We must not overlook the fact that in the vocabulary of modernism, “pious” is a term of reproach or ridicule. A survey will show that it is always applied to persons who have accepted a dispensation. Now modernism encourages the exact opposite of this, which is rebelliousness; and rebellion, as the legend of the Fall tells us, comes from pride. Pride and impatience, these are the ingredients of that contumely which denies substance because substance stands in the way. Hence the war against nature, against other men, against the past. For modern man there is no providence, because it would imply a wisdom superior to his and a relationship of means to ends which he cannot find out. Instead of feeling grateful that some things are past his discovering (how odd it sounded when Churchill, the last survivor of the old school, declared that the secret of atomic power had been “mercifully withheld” from man), he is vexed and promises himself that one day the last arcanum will be forced to yield its secret.

His pride reveals itself in impatience, which is an unwillingness to bear the pain of discipline. The physical world is a complex of imposed conditions; when these thwart immediate expressions of his will, he becomes angry and asserts that there should be no obstruction of his wishes. In effect this becomes a deification of his own will; man is not making himself like a god but is taking himself as he is and putting himself in the place of God. Of this we have seen many instances.

He is unwilling to admit the condition of time, and to this may be attributed not only the growing indifference to quality but also the decay of style in all departments of contemporary life. For, regardless of how it is expressed, style is a sort of regulated movement which depends on the observing of intervals. This is true in manners as in music, both of which on the popular level have been collapsed by impatience. All style whatever formalizes that in which it occurs, and we have seen how the modern temper feels imprisoned by all form. Style and grace are never seen in those who have not learned the lesson of endurance—which is a version of the lesson of heroism.

When we ask modern man to accept the substance of nature and of history, we ask him, in a way, to harden him-self. He must not, like the child, expect all delights freely; he must not, like the miseducated adult, expect all paradoxes to be resolved for him. He must be ready to say at times with Thomas Hooker: “The point is difficult and the mystery great.” And as he learns that he is a creature who does not fully comprehend his creation, it is to be hoped that

he will exercise caution in the appropriation of efficient means. His picture of the world will be changed profoundly if he merely has to take cognizance of the fact that he is dependent on the universe, as it in turn seems dependent on something else.

Here we return for the last time to the problem which loomed at the beginning of our discourse: the quest for true knowledge. With ignorance virtually institutionalized, how can we get man to see? Bewildered by his curious alienation from reality, he is unable to prescribe for himself, for he imagines that what he needs is more of the disease.

At this point I must pause long enough to say that the numerous people maintaining that we suffer only from a cultural lag, that man's spiritual progress has not caught up with his material progress, proceed on a completely misleading analogy. There is nothing to indicate that these two are complementary or that they can go forward on parallel tracks. It would be far truer to say that moral purpose is deflected by proximity of great material means as rays of light are bent by matter. The advocates of spiritual revival exhibit a weakness typical of liberalism in their unwillingness to recognize this opposition.

Thus present-day reformers combat dilution by diluting further, dispersion by a more vigorous dispersing. Now that we have unchained forces of unpredictable magnitude, all that keeps the world from chaos are certain patterns, ill understood and surviving through force of inertia. Once these disappear, and we lack even an adventitious basis for unity, nothing separates us from the fifth century A.D.

It is said that physicians sometimes ask patients, "Do you really wish to get well?" And, to be perfectly realistic in this matter, we must put the question of whether modern civilization wishes to survive. One can detect signs of suicidal impulse; one feels at times that the modern world is calling for madder music and for stronger wine, is craving some delirium which will take it completely away from reality. One is made to think of Kierkegaard's figure of spectators in the theater, who applaud the announcement and repeated announcement that the building is on fire.

I have tried, as far as possible, to express the thought of this essay in secular language, but there are points where it has proved impossible to dispense with appeal to religion. And I think this term must be invoked to describe the strongest sustaining power in a life which is from limited points of view "solitary, poor, nasty, brut-

ish, and short.” It can be shown in every case that loss of belief results in some form of bitterness. Ancient cynicism, skepticism, and even stoicism, which were products of the decline of Greek religion, each concealed a bitterness. There is bitterness in the thought that there may be no hell; for—in the irrefutable syllogism of the theologians—if there is no hell, there is no justice. And bitterness is always an incentive to self-destruction. When it becomes evident that the world’s rewards are not adequate to the world’s pain, and when the possibility of other reward is denied, simple calculation demands the ending of all. The task is how to keep men from feeling desperately unrewarded. Do they today wish to go on living, or do they wish to destroy the world? Some are unable to comprehend the depth of bitterness which may induce a desire for the second course.

Suppose we get an affirmative answer to our first question; people tell us they do want to go on living—and not just biologically as rats in the corners of wrecked cities but in communities of civilization. Then we must ask the question whether they are willing to pay the price. For possibly their attitude toward this is like their attitude toward peace: they want it, but not at the expense of giving up this and that thing which they have come to think of as the warp and woof of their existence.

There is an unforgettable scene in Lincoln Steffens’ *Autobiography* which tells of a proposal made by Clemenceau at the Versailles Peace Conference. The astute Frenchman, having listened to much talk that this was a war to end war forever, asked Wilson, Lloyd George, and Orlando whether they were taking the idea seriously. After obtaining assent from each of the somewhat nonplussed heads of state, Clemenceau proceeded to add up before them the cost. The British would have to give up their colonial system; the Americans would have to get out of the Philippines, to keep their hands off Mexico; and on and on it went. Clemenceau’s colleagues soon made it plain that this was not at all what they had in mind, whereupon the French realist bluntly told them that they wanted not peace but war. Such is the position of all who urge justice but really want, and actually choose, other things.

In the same way, we have to inform the multitude that restoration comes at a price. Suppose we give them an intimation of the cost through a series of questions. Are you ready, we must ask them, to grant that the law of reward is inflexible and that one cannot, by cunning or through complaints, obtain more than he puts in? Are you prepared to see that comfort may be a seduction and that the fetish of material prosperity will have to be pushed aside in favor

of some sterner ideal? Do you see the necessity of accepting duties before you begin to talk of freedoms? These things will be very hard; they will call for deep reformation. It may well be that the course of degeneration has proved so enervating that there is no way of reinspiring with ideals. We know that such is often the case with individual histories.

Yet it is the duty of those who can foresee the end of a saturnalia to make their counsel known. Nothing is more certain than that we are all in this together. Practically, no one can stand aside from a sweep as deep and broad as the decline of a civilization. If the thinkers of our time cannot catch the imagination of the world to the point of effecting some profound transformation, they must succumb with it. There will be little joy in the hour when they can say, "I told you so." And their present efforts show small sign of effect. Perhaps we shall have to learn the truth along some *via dolorosa*.

It may be that we are awaiting a great change, that the sins of the fathers are going to be visited upon the generations until the reality of evil is again brought home and there comes some passionate reaction, like that which flowered in the chivalry and spirituality of the Middle Ages. If such is the most we can hope for, something toward that revival may be prepared by acts of thought and volition in this waning day of the West. 📖

The last chapter from his famous 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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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.