

BEYOND LIBERALISM

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We heard a good deal during the election campaign of 2001 about how so many people, especially younger people, were evidently bored with politics —politics, anyway, as conventionally imagined in Britain. What we heard less about was something that is perhaps of even greater moment: that we're bored with government. I don't mean that we are fed up with the particular set of people currently dominant in Westminster and Whitehall, but that we seem to be losing sight of what the very idea of government is about. Just as political debate, in the usual sense of the words, was overshadowed in the election campaign by the calculation of electoral 'concerns' that might be useful foci for appeals, so the actual processes and protocols of government are increasingly overshadowed by what is, in effect, a growing (apparent) expectation that public decisions should be made in response to popular or populist pressure. The ideal model is the referendum, the binding expression of the will of the people.

A couple of examples. Last autumn's fuel protests represented a very interesting political development, in that they were seen as legitimate attempts to force government into certain simple palliative actions to relieve particular groups within the economy. Plenty of people have remarked on the odd fact that this strategy was widely regarded as illegitimate in the distant days of union power and tactical strike action; but I don't think the change is just fickleness or even just about the fact that last autumn's protesters enjoyed a rather closer relation with the conservative media than did Arthur Scargill. I suspect that it has to do with an assumption that political and social 'goods' are seen more and more as fixed objects of aspiration, as commodities marketed by the national executive. Failure to deliver is a breach of political contract, so that pressure to enforce the contract is intelligible and defensible. In a very different (and morally rather more serious) context, the election of a parliamentary candidate representing not a national party but a local coalition around the issue of hospital closures sends a comparable

signal: government must be pressed to deliver specified goods in response to specified demand.

This latter case is, as I've admitted, more morally arguable in some ways than that of the fuel protesters, but it shares the same problematic character; it assumes that the relation of citizen to government is that of consumer to provider. Just as, in respect of the behaviour of multinational companies, we are urged to use consumer power to change policy, so in relation to government, we act as if our voting were a variety of that consumer pressure: the politicizing of consumption (not at all a bad idea) advances in step with the consumerization of politics (not at all a good idea). What we are seeing, I suggest, is a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the typically modern models of political relationship, which depict the individual political subject, endowed with rights, over against the state, endowed with the monopoly of legitimate power, and thus of legitimate violence or coercion. The purpose of political action, on such models, is to persuade the power-holder to honour or realize the rights of the citizen.

Obviously—in conventional modern understandings of liberal democracy—the power-holder has the job of assessing and balancing conflicting claims from individuals or groups; the state is a kind of tribunal. But if the drift in the culture at large is towards an understanding of rights as intrinsic endowments, as a kind of promissory note possessed by human agents or collectivities of human agents, it is not surprising that the primary goal of political action is seen as applying what pressure is available, short of private violence, so as to cash in the note. What is missing is the possibility of challenging the account of our entitlement with which any one of us or any group of us starts off, in such a way that the desired 'fair' political outcome is allowed to be in important ways unclear as yet, and to be fully determined in the political process itself.

This happens only when there is something like authentic public debate in a society, because only in such an environment can there be a movement towards an understanding of the political or social good that is different from any one of the starting points of the participants. Ideally, this process is one of defining what is arguably good in some measure for all involved; and thus one of discovering in what ways my good is 'invested in' yours. As Gillian Rose argues so forcefully in her posthumous collection of papers, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*¹ this understanding of the political cuts across both communitarianism and liberalism as normally conceived. It resists the pull of communitarianism towards a static account of communal identity and interest, and the liberal's uncritical prioritizing of

1. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 3-7, 63-76.

the individual with his or her given agenda. Rose notes the complicity of the two approaches, which both arise from the fundamental reluctance of modernity to think through the relation between the self as legal subject and the very concept of law—the divorce between law and self-understanding.

Her counter-appeal is to Hegel, who, she argues, begins from the assumption that we invariably mis-recognize ourselves and each other and require our processes of thinking to be educated and shaped in and by the political process itself ‘Mis-recognizing’ another, for Rose, is failing to see the other’s relation to her/himself—that is, to see the other as reflexive, involved in thought. But if I cannot recognize thought and self-reflexivity, I am failing to know what I myself do when I think or represent myself to myself. My primitive initial self-reflection is going to be a mistake; only in grasping how another is so engaged do I begin to know what I am doing when I think about myself. Law, says Rose, is the whole process of drawing out and contesting the basic misrecognitions of human life together; it is inseparable from imagination and education, *Bildung*.

‘The law, therefore, in its actuality means full mutual recognition, “spirit” or ethical life.’² In historical practice, what this means is that the processes of public debate and decision are there to expose our failures of mutual recognition and to move us on towards behaviour that is authentically moral, rather than the litigious bargaining of an uncritically rights-dominated society. Rose goes further and says that the root of the trouble is what she calls ‘the self-opposition of subject to its substance’.³ In plainer words, what this means is that our failure to recognize what we are as thinking beings leaves us simply as marooned individual wills or clusters of instinct and need, unaware of what constitutes us human in ‘substance’. What we are *with* each other becomes a secondary adjunct to the basic felt immediacy of me or us as subjects of wanting. And both the liberal and the communitarian refuse in their different ways the risk of political discovery in its proper sense—not only what are the goods that are, borrowing a phrase of Charles Taylor’s which I have discussed elsewhere, necessarily social, unintelligible unless shared, but also how the very idea of the good for me is modified, sometimes drastically, by the process of political engagement, corporate social determination.

This is fully to grant the sort of reservations about communitarianism expressed by a sympathetic critic like Raymond Plant in his recent *Politics, Theology and History*: on a purely ‘narrative’, community-specific account of the social good, where is there any ‘framework for dialogue’?⁴ The problem

2. Rose, *Mourning*, p. 75.

3. Rose, *Mourning*, p. 76.

4. Raymond Plant, *Politics, Theology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 350.

is that, in a sense, the liberal view is equally inimical to dialogue. As Plant spells out, the supposedly neutral stance of the liberal may conceal that 'perfectionist liberalism', to use a designation that has gained some currency, which identifies autonomy as a supreme positive good and judges other 'bids' for the definition of the good in relation to their promotion of this specific goal.⁵ A religious community may refuse to accept this as a proposition about what is morally primary in the common life of human beings; but if the only alternative is communitarianism (and therefore a radical pluralism about social goods), the community has to accept that a liberal framework which accepts that religious doctrine or tradition is welcome because it maximizes some sort of choice (and therefore serves autonomy) is its safest ally. So Plant argues; but I suspect that, even if we agree about the dangers of a sectarian communitarianism, more needs to be said about how far religious communities can accept what he and others call 'perfectionist liberalism' as providing the 'framework for dialogue' he wishes to see.

For if autonomy is that in terms of which other policies and moral projects are assessed, what we are actually presented with is a purely *formal* good (the exercise of will and choice) which is virtually impossible to state as a properly social good. Or in slightly different words, the only social good on which fundamental consensus can be reached is the facilitating of individual autonomy by the mechanics of public agreement. Is it enough to say that a religious community is bound to defend a liberal polity because at least it guarantees the community's own 'territorial' integrity as a legitimate option? I am not sure that this really leaves us with any less pluralism about social goods than Plant ascribes to communitarian/narrativist models, since the consensual good within which the range of options is located is not, I believe, intelligibly a social good, nor even a substantive one.

'Perfectionist liberalism', a stance identifying a single controlling good for the liberal society, seems hard to state in any way that meets this concern. In a recent essay, Stanley Hauerwas makes a similar point in saying that 'identity politics is but a further development of liberal political arrangements that have the effect of turning us into interest groups bereft of any serious historical narrative'.⁶ Hauerwas is here responding to a sympathetic and careful critique of his work by Charles Mathewes, which suggested that he might be guilty of a kind of collusion with the 'Balkanized' ethics and politics of liberal America. Mathewes observes with great acuity that the difficulty with this political situation is that it misconceives 'identity' itself

5. Plant, *Politics*, pp. 345-00.

6. Stanley Hauerwas, 'Many Hands Working: A Response to Charles Mathewes', *Anglican Theological Review* 82.2 (Spring 2000), pp. 361-64 (363).

evading the issue of 'admitting the other into the self, which is the only way the self can be itself at all'.⁷ A too robustly and uncritically narrativist appeal to Christian identity all too readily becomes complicit in this misrecognition of identity. Hauerwas evidently agrees, and denies the complicity; but perhaps what we need at this point is some developed account of what a narrative and community-based political ethic would look like if it took seriously Mathewes's remarks about identity.

And this is where Rose's perspective has value in steering between caricature versions of the liberal and the communitarian. Mathewes, Hauerwas and Rose are at one, apparently, in seeing the politics of liberal modernity and the politics of identity as irretrievably bound up with each other. Rose, I believe, goes furthest in analysing the fundamental character of the error involved and pointing to the process by which it may be contained (not resolved). At its most basic, the therapy is to do with understanding what law is—the accepted possibility that I or my kind may be called in question by an institution that represents neither an impersonal, view-from-nowhere objectivity nor simply the refereeing of violent intercommunal conflict, but the shared will to redefine specific interest and particular good in a shared practice. To accept this is to allow that redefinition is not necessarily fatal loss; indeed, that it may be *fuller* or better definition, since an isolated identity is always inadequate or fictive. 'Law' is a shorthand for all procedures or institutions that enable this recognition of misrecognition, this tentative step towards grasping the mutual investment of self and other. A shorthand because it will not quite do to assume that the institutions of British or European (let alone American) legal practice are necessarily the saviours of social awareness...

'Law' could mean in this connection a wide range of practices: ordinary arbitration, certainly, but also the processes involved in setting up a local trading scheme or credit union; a forum on race issues or asylum seekers, moderated by an independent organization; even, stretching the sense of the word a long way, a new public agreement on a history syllabus in a territory whose past is marked by deep divisions and injustices (some successful examples in Canada, a still bitterly controverted set of initiatives and efforts in Israel). 'Law' is the creation of an uneasy and quite risky world of discourse in which we (so to speak) admit our fears of one another and attempt to settle on agreed practices that will contain that fear and give us common points of reference—in a simple common agenda, or in a statement of mutually agreed expectations or claims.

7. Charles Mathewes, 'Appreciating Hauerwas: One Hand Clapping', *Anglican Theological Review* 82.2 (Spring 2000), pp. 343-60 (355).

This is something of a refinement to a simple discourse of rights, to the extent that it involves procedures for mutual recognition. Michael Ignatieff in a recent set of broadcast lectures on *The Rights Revolution*, defends a rights-based political culture with great eloquence, but broadens its scope to take in this issue of recognition;

National unity...depends on equality of rights and equality of recognition: majorities recognize minorities; minorities recognize majorities. Both seek shelter under the arch of a law they can trust, since both have had a hand in building it.⁸

What he seems to be arguing for is precisely that social space beyond the formal right of appeal to a universal tribunal that often underpins rights models of society. He gives a number of useful instances of what the mutual recognition of majorities and minorities might involve, as opposed to 'a contract of mutual indifference',⁹ noting that minorities as well as majorities are capable of demeaning and distorting caricatures of the Other. Where that is the prevailing rhetoric, the best that can be hoped for is a minimal and grudging toleration which does not actually modify either side's self-understanding. His examples include the vexed area of rights for sexual minorities, where, as he notes, conservative paranoia about the threat to the family is easily worsened by an overheated rhetoric about the oppressiveness of traditional relational patterns. Minority and majority alike, to shift back to Gillian Rose's language for a moment, are failing to imagine the self-relatedness of the other, and, more deeply, failing to understand the mutual investment of interest or welfare involved. What if the heterosexual family cannot realize its own proper virtue and good so long as it defines itself as wholly and non-negotiably the 'other' to same-sex partnerships or whatever?¹⁰ Similarly, he considers the matter of minority or aboriginal ethnic claims and deplores the straightforward assimilation of the majority to active and aggressive colonialists.

It would be easy, perhaps, to caricature this as a plea for procedural good manners whose effect is to administer a gentle hegemonic rebuke to minorities for their shrillness; a very Canadian strategy, a critic of the Canadian Ignatieff might say. There are uncomfortable questions he does not fully face about how the self-description of the majority is to be challenged (few people ever volunteer to describe themselves as racists or colonialists, but there is a job to be done in making it possible for a majority to see what

8. Michael Ignatieff, *The Rights Revolution* (Toronto: Anansi, 2000), p. 124.

9. Ignatieff, *The Rights Revolution*, p. 123.

10. For a searching and unusual study that raises this issue, see Elizabeth A. Say and Mark R. Kowalewski, *Gays, Lesbians and Family Values* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998).

objective and historical factors might make these appropriate structural descriptions). But he is in fact also attempting the very difficult task, practically incapable of definition in the abstract, of challenging an emancipationist discourse that can work only by reinscribing resentment and exclusion, by finding new scapegoats. If—to pick up an Augustinian notion—one of the morally significant problems about tyranny is its corruption of the tyrant, if the interest of the oppressor needs not simply overthrowing but redefining, such an effort is imperative. The simple connection of right with reparation is not enough; witness the public confusion about punishment in this country—though that is another and a thornier question.

Ignatieff like Rose, is ultimately arguing that common values will not emerge from a purely rights-driven political culture; like Hauerwas, they see the complicity between the liberal and the communitarian, who are really doing little more than offering rival versions of the ‘contract of mutual indifference’, disagreeing only about the moral standing of the public tribunal of the state. And it is at this point that the theological question begins to come into focus, I believe. Ignatieff speaks movingly of the act of imagination required to make this process of recognition a reality; but what exactly is being recognized? Rose apparently assumes that the fundamental element is the very act of conscious self-relatedness in the other. This is more than just acknowledging the other as in some general sense reflective. In Rose’s Hegelian perspective, it is about seeing the other as involved in exactly the same history of risk, error and unacknowledged need of the other as oneself—as somewhere on the same map. It is not therefore an abstract recognition but the projection of a narrative in which self and other have complementary roles, still to be fully discovered. The other is not sealed off, either as an enemy or as a source of absolute moral claim (Rose’s unease with the political ethics emanating from Levinas is evident here).¹¹ The question is, though, if we are talking about more than abstract recognition, what is the character of the projected narrative and whence does it derive.

It needs to be a narrative in which each subject is seen as intrinsically in need of fulfilment by the mediation of other subjects and therefore in which purely individual interest is unthinkable. It must also be a narrative in which the common enterprise of humanity is essentially something that is being constantly learned, that is not at any historical moment capable of being defined as complete. It must also prescribe for any political agent (and especially for the political agent currently dominating the terms of political conversation) a willingness to absorb criticism and to modify the prevailing rhetoric of welfare or common good in the light of what we have been

11. See also her discussion in *Judaism and Modernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), chs. 1–3 and 13.

thinking of in relation to the practices of 'law'. If we are to propose a place in political discourse for theology, it is here, as Hegel rightly saw. Hegel understood that without a 'myth' of spirit or self-reflexivity as fundamentally a self-staking and a self-risking, politics could not happen; we should remain at the level of oppositional goods, deprived of a full account of the good that is irreducibly social and humanly universal. Politics would shrink to the scale of minimizing open conflicts between mutually unintelligible projects. That may well be where a good deal of modern political discourse in fact ends up, but that only serves to illustrate the dangerous minimalism of much liberal politics, and its tacit collusion with the assumption of inescapable violence.

But a myth of spirit in such terms cannot be simply a projection from the will of one human group; its claim has to be more ambitious, a claim for revelation—not as the ultimate seal of ideological dominance, but, in this case, as the ground for projects of recognition or even repentance as the means of discovering a more comprehensive good. The Christian narrative affirms that the self-emptying or 'decentring' of spirit is first the rationale of creation and then the content of the story of Jesus and the call of the believing assembly. This assembly (the Church) exists not to make political policy or to witness to an abstract universal justice or emancipation, but to speak of and enact the patterns of self-displacing and self-risking invited by the story of the self-displacing God, who elects to live in the life of the radically other (contingent and historical humanity, mortal vulnerability). It assumes that fundamental to creation is a mediation of the one foundational act of God' self-sharing, God's Word, in and inseparably in the multiplicity of creation; no created subject or agent is without the 'Word', without a communication from God of life and the possibility of contemplative fruition. The Christian believer begins from the premises: (1) that each finite agent is capable of 'speaking' and bestowing something of the creator; and (2) that the creator directly enables a common practice and language bearing witness to this mutual speaking and receiving through the events of the life of Jesus, grasped as the radical self-dispossession of God.

This, I suggest, is where the Church's contribution to 'common values' lies. It is relatively easy to mortgage the Church to partnership in a rather bland global ethic, a set of uncontroversial endorsements of justice and tolerance. This is not a waste of time, but it fails on two counts to do justice to what the Christian community might be contributing to the re-imagining of the common good. In the first place, it gives no account of how exactly a Christian politics emerges from the specifics of Christian narrative, tending to assume that such a narrative is a sort of illustrative gloss on fairly obvious ideals of universal kinship. Second, it therefore also misses the

tragic or ironic elements in Christian discourse, the fore grounding of failure and misunderstanding and thus of learning and mutuality. So far from a narrative basis for Christian political ethics narrowing the range of pertinence of our theological language, the narrative actually offers the grounding for the possibility of a more than formal recognition between human beings (because of the doctrine of creation in or through the Word) and a constant self-reshaping (because of the model of divine self-loss consummated in the crucifixion).

The Church does not, then, provide a systematic political ethic, but two related conditions for any political ethic capable of avoiding tribalism on the one hand and abstraction on the other: a prohibition against imagining any individual or group interest in isolation from the good of all, and a procedural insistence upon self-questioning, in the wake of this prohibition. Its focus is necessarily local and mobile, depending on the particular patterns of exclusion and dominance, lordship and slavery, in this or that context; and, as Barth long ago remarked, it is therefore an unreliable political ally, because of its willingness to change position as the scapegoat's identity shifts. But the significance of what it offers is not going to be appreciated so long as people remain convinced that mutual human recognition is a matter of self-evident sense. The characteristic conflicts of our 'secular' world are increasingly seen as essentially totalizing; to put it at its bleakest, genocidal violence is more common than it was. And the 'politics of identity' can encourage this totalizing apprehension of otherness in ways that undermine the very notion of social or universal goods and their indivisibility. But the recognition made possible by a pure rights-and-tribunal model remains formal and copes badly with the idea of reciprocal need. As Ignatieff says, imagination and empathy are needed; but they do not grow on trees and they are not the obvious virtues some assume they are. To say why they are so needs a more comprehensive picture, a political and theological metaphysic.

And on the ground this means a number of very prosaic enterprises for the Church. It has something to do with how the Church itself deals with conflict—a somewhat bitter subject for reflection at a time when the Church's corporate skills in this area are conspicuously failing. It has something to do as well with what in each local environment can be done to revive political debate and to shift the terms of argument away from the consumerist model I began with. The Church's remarkable success in organizing hustings during the last two election campaigns is interesting, as is the role of the Church in some enterprises like citizens' juries and the mass lobbies of Jubilee 2,000. In all this, it is not that the Church is setting an agenda, though it will have, I hope, robust things of its own to say; it is rather seeking to make room for what it is bound to regard as the fundamental political virtue—the willingness to search, even at cost, for a good not yet defined, and thus to entertain

the possibility of repentance. Without this, Christians must believe, there is no possibility of that comprehensive social exchange which the Church attempts, with pathetic inadequacy, to model, because it believes that that is what the nature and act of the Christian God both demand and enable.

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