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Virtue, Civilization and the Restitution of Man

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Virtue, Civilization and the Restitution of Man

Angus J. L. Menuge

Virtue, Civilization and the Restitution of Man

by Angus J. L. Menuge

On the railroad trains, all the passengers together were a community, called by a shared moral understanding to sacrifice for each other. But if, as we now seem to think, there are no other passengers, there is no community. . . . The illusion that we travel life alone is ruining us all. The proper name of the illusion is incivility.¹

1. Introduction.

“Darkness comes upon them in the daytime; at noon they grope as in the night.”
Job 5:14.

That virtue and civilization are in decline ought to be beyond dispute. However, language itself has been corrupted and euphemism is used to mask moral failures as progress. Abortion is “reproductive freedom” and the abdication of parental responsibility for tiny children is an “early opportunity for socialization,” and a means of “empowerment” for adults. In fact, one can feel quite saintly for all the hard work one has to do in order to live a life of self-centered vanity and conspicuous consumption.

The rot is high as well as low. At Harvard Divinity School, the dean is sacked for storing thousands of pornographic images on his hard drive.² At Dartmouth college, an ELCA pastor tries to prevent Campus Crusade from distributing free copies of C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* to incoming freshmen.³ He appeals to that *simulacrum* of virtue⁴, the “new tolerance,”⁵ according to which it is wrong to “impose” one’s belief on others. Conveniently ignored are the considerations that (1) presenting a view is not imposing it,

(2) the students were allowed to decline the book (none did) and (3) the Great Commission (Mt. 28: 19-20) mandates evangelism. Again, senior government officials, perhaps the President, did nothing when they knew that vital military secrets were being passed on to the Chinese.⁶ “We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst.”⁷

More disturbing than such failures is the growing moral blindness—the inability to discern virtues when they are exercised. After boldly confessing her faith, Cassie Bernall, a 17 year old student at Columbine High School, is shot to death.⁸ National Public Radio highlights the racial bigotry of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, but says nothing of Cassie Bernall’s martyrdom. Having so often depicted Christians as intolerant oppressors of liberal values, NPR can make nothing of Cassie’s story. The moral blindness encompasses not only ends—what virtues are—but also means—the way to develop virtuous people and institutions. Whatever the merits of gun control, it concerns only the symptoms of a violent culture, not its causes. It says nothing about how we raise moral individuals and sustain communities.

How and why has this decline in virtue and civilization happened? What can be done about it? This paper will sketch the answers to these

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questions which Lewis, and like-minded thinkers in the great tradition from Plato and Aristotle to Alasdair MacIntyre, have proposed. First, we will clarify what virtue is and how it is connected to civilization.

2. Virtue and Civilization.

“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” 1. Cor. 12: 26.

Aristotle tells us that anything with a purpose (*telos*) has an excellence. A knife has the purpose of cutting and its excellence is sharpness. Human beings have the purpose of flourishing (*eudaimonia*), or realizing their talents, and their excellences are the virtues. Aristotle defines the virtues as those dispositions and sentiments that enable us to live well in community. They are necessary for human flourishing because an individual cannot develop his talents without the support of others and because providing service to the community is part of what flourishing is. A musically talented life-long hermit not only cannot become a concert pianist with no-one to train him, he also cannot delight others with his recitals. He and civilization are diminished together. Likewise with the virtues. Virtues can only be inculcated, and fully expressed, in community.

The basic or “cardinal virtues” listed by Aristotle include three moral virtues: justice, temperance and courage, and an intellectual virtue, practical wisdom, which we might call good judgment. Thomas Aquinas saw the cardinal virtues as the foundation for civil society, available to all men despite sin. In addition, he proposed three “theological virtues,” faith, hope and charity (*agape* love), available to the Christian through grace.

Augustine and the Reformers were less comfortable with this picture of grace completing nature, emphasizing that we are by nature enemies of God. Nonetheless, Luther retained the idea of civic righteousness as a means to maintain order in a sinful world. All people, Christians and non-Christians, have vocations, callings to serve their neighbor, defined by their gifts (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12).⁹ In this context, virtue could be defined as what enables one to carry out one’s vocation, thereby developing one’s own talents and maintaining a civilized society.

In all these accounts, the modern individualistic idea that there is a fundamental conflict between the individual good and the common good simply does not arise. Again, in this tradition, law, though it is important to limit immoral behavior is not the essence of the moral life. All of these thinkers would have been mystified by the idea that you can make better people by passing more laws. Aristotle does not even talk about moral rules in his *Nicomachean Ethics* as he thinks the primary task is to form a character that will want to uphold the community: without such a character, laws will only curb bad behavior when there is a fear of being caught. Laws may provide some extrinsic motivation to be civil in public, but do not provide intrinsic motivation which will carry over into our so-called private lives. In fact, the contemporary public/private distinction is itself a symptom of our lack of virtue. As Plato argued, a truly just man would continue to be just even if he had a magic ring which would make him invisible. And a worker who views his occupation as a vocation will do good work, so as to better serve his neighbor, even when the supervisor is not evaluating him.

3. Men Without Chests.

“People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power.” 2 Timothy 3:2-5.

It is abundantly clear that virtue exposes a gaping hole in our contemporary society. We live in the ruins of a Greek temple and have lost or rejected the only tools which could rebuild it. The ruin of our civilization is only a reflection of the ruin of our souls. Lewis tells us that we have created men without chests, an allusion to Plato’s theory of the soul.

In a just man, Plato tells us, the head rules the belly through the chest. That is, the intellect or reason controls the appetites (self-centered desires) with the help of magnanimity, the spirited element. Magnanimity is the seat of those nobler sentiments that transcend the egoistic craving of the belly. It is what enables someone to fight in battle or stand up for the truth or to fulfill their vocation as parent or spouse, even if it means delaying or denying the gratification of the belly. Without magnanimity, there can be no civilization because it alone provides the sense of a common good over and above personal pleasure.

A man without a chest is inevitably a shallow hedonist. His intellect serves only two purposes: determining how to gratify his belly, and rationalizing that choice should it be challenged on moral grounds. Since such gratification often does not contribute to the moral good, the man without a chest must

resort to propaganda, manipulating language to make his self-centered behavior appear in a good light. Although the man without a chest has no real virtue, self-interest will make him develop the *simulacra* of virtue necessary to gain the cooperation of others, when it is needed, and to avoid punishment. If caught in wrongdoing, the chestless man may even produce an impression of repentance worthy of an Oscar. He will even appeal to the common good and moral principles whenever they happen to coincide with his own interest, quietly dropping them when they do not.

Above all, the chestless man is a manipulator, who will say and do whatever is necessary to get what he wants. As Alasdair MacIntyre argues, such men are the mainstay of modern bureaucracies which must mould the behavior of others to suit their own ends without the benefit of moral authority.¹⁰ With our modern emphasis on the amoral prerogatives of profitability, effectiveness and power, virtue is seen as obsolete. The final outcome of such thinking is portrayed in Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength* by the character of John Wither, the Deputy Director of the N.I.C.E. Wither “is able to utter whole paragraphs of elegant prose that, upon reflection, turn out to have meant nothing . . . language is unmade, is pressed into the service of non-meaning and thus of confusion and alienation.”¹¹ All the while creating a hell of individualistic egotism and envy, Wither keeps insisting that “we are a family,” a popular illusion of community propagated in modern businesses.

4. Whither atrophy?

“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him,

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but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." Rom. 1:21.

Why has our society come to be dominated by men without chests? Lewis and other like-minded thinkers have found the explanation in four inter-related factors: (1) the failure of modernist ethics, (2) scientism, (3) educational trends and (4) the rise of propaganda as a surrogate for moral influence.

4.1 *The failure of modernist ethics.*

For Plato and Aristotle, ethics was a rational science, since it is an objective question how humans should live in order to flourish. Modernism, however, came to view science as the study of a purposeless nature and assimilated all reason to the empirical and logical methods of science. On this constricted model, the claims of traditional ethics are not rationally justified because they are neither verifiable by observation nor provable by logic. In place of traditional ethics, therefore, a rational surrogate would have to be found.

Hutcheson, Bentham and Hume suggested utilitarianism: the idea that we should do those actions which promote the greatest good for the greatest number. Unable to justify traditional virtues, this "good" had to be reduced to something measurable, such as happiness. Likewise socialism takes the basic idea of utilitarianism but translates good into the "scientific" notion of economic welfare. It soon enough became clear that tremendous evil can be done to individuals in the name of maximizing happiness or welfare. Executing an innocent man to please the mob, "ethnic cleansing," and exiling dissidents to the gulags are the consequences of this enlightened thinking.

Kant realized that utilitarianism failed as an ethic because of its willingness to treat people as means rather than ends in themselves. He proposed that we can see whether an action is moral by appeal to universal reason shared by all people: an action is permissible only if it can be willed that all do the action. Thus stealing is wrong because the burglar cannot will that all steal, lest he lose his ill-gotten gains. Kant does not, however, defeat the cynical hypocrite. Although the burglar cannot will that all steal, he may reason that most others won't steal and think that he will not get caught. The problem with the burglar is not lack of logic, as Kant suggests, but lack of virtue, of intrinsic motivation to do the right thing. Without the inculcation of a moral character, universal reason is powerless to persuade the cynic.

By the Twentieth Century the project of founding ethics on universal reason was abandoned by many. Logical positivism, popularized by A. J. Ayer in his *Language Truth and Logic*, declared that ethical statements, being neither verifiable by observation nor true by definition, were literally meaningless. Instead, Ayer, along with Russell and C. L. Stevenson, suggested that ethical statements are really disguised expressions of the speaker's emotions of approval or disapproval. This is the emotivism criticized by Alasdair MacIntyre¹² and which informs the writers of the Green Book (*The Control of Language*), which is the starting place of Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*.

Emotivism has the effect of destroying magnanimity. It implies that "all statements containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker" and that "all such statements are unimportant,"¹³ because purely subjective. It thus eliminates the idea that "objects did not merely receive,

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but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt.”¹⁴ From such a point of view, it is pointless to train or inculcate just sentiments, for all are equal. With a nice gesture toward a democracy of feeling, the amusement Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold felt as they killed 13 people is just as “valid” as the outrage of the victims’ families. Apparently, the ACLU shares this worldview: when Ohio high-school students expressed their congratulation for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold and the Principal expelled them, the ACLU required the school to re-admit the students, because of course, every sentiment is as valid as any other.¹⁵

4.2 *Scientism.*

Not only has morality been reduced to personal feeling, human beings have been reduced to a part of nature, “in the same sense that a stone is, or a cactus or a camel.”¹⁶ This is the result of scientism, “that unique combination of atheism, materialist philosophy, evolutionism, hostility to religion, and doctrinaire adherence to the universal validity of the scientific method which has become the gospel according to [H. G.] Wells, Thomas Huxley, . . . Carl Sagan . . . and a great many others.”¹⁷ Scientism argues that science is the sole method of gaining knowledge and that since science studies only nature, nature is all there is. Thus the ideas of God, souls or objective morality are illusions, because they are not natural. Since human beings have no special dignity, they may be manipulated by eugenics, cloning, behavioral conditioning, etc., by those in power. Human beings are reduced to a commodity, to be tailored to amoral purposes and bought and sold like cattle. By reducing all reasoning to instrumental reasoning (how things are

manipulated as means), no criteria can be given to distinguish moral and immoral ends. Without a restoration of morality, genetic engineering and cloning will likely be allowed simply to gratify amoral consumer preferences for various “human resources.”

4.3 *Educational trends.*

As it percolated down into educational theory, emotivism has had a variety of harmful effects. In Lewis’s day, the assumption seems to have been that since value statements are merely subjective reports of emotion, they need to be debunked, thus strangling the pupil’s magnanimity at birth. As Lewis noted,

The right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.¹⁸

In America’s schools, pluralism has been used as an excuse to relegate not only religion, but even civic morality into a private realm, despite a 1993 Gallup poll indicating “that 90 percent of parents agree that public schools should teach the Golden Rule, moral courage, caring, ethnic tolerance, and honesty.”¹⁹ Something called “values” can be discussed, but usually in the context of a “non-judgmental values clarification,” which presupposes that values are private possessions and that all are equally “valid.” Values clarification combines emotivism with the 1960’s insistence on “free expression,” but does not explain why it is important to express what it believes to be

purely subjective. One teacher felt obliged to explain that it isn't wrong for a student to feel it is OK to cheat, even though she would deduct marks if cheating were detected.²⁰ No wonder cheating²¹, laziness, cynicism and even overt hatred for others have become epidemic in American schools. No wonder that "almost every student believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."²² Matters are not helped by spurious appeals to equality: intelligent criticism cannot be made when students can claim "I'm as good as you"²³ no matter what they think or do. This approach abdicates the responsibility of moral education, and "without the development over time of stable character traits, all other moral appeals will fall on deaf ears."²⁴ The self-esteem movement has made matters worse since encouraging self-esteem no matter how bad the work or behavior denies "children guidance and concrete rules of behavior, forcing them into a role of authority, as if they were adults."²⁵

Another obstacle to moral education has been the scientific obsession of educators with the means of education (learning methodologies and processes) at the expense of serious thought about the ends. As sociologist David Martin puts it, "the field of education feels the need to produce bogus innovation in order to show that it emulates the scientific paradigm."²⁶ At the same time, narrow vocationalism, which sees worth only in practical techniques, encourages faculty and students to think that the most important questions—such as "How should I live?"—are a waste of time, thereby imprisoning the student in the prejudices of his own age.

With good intentions, educators have tried to prepare children for the dangers of the world, by informing them about drugs, violence and sexual abuse, but these programs have not only failed to promote character, they

have "backfired, . . . exacerbating the dilemmas they seek to resolve"²⁷ by causing an increase in fear, paranoia, and hence hatred and hopelessness which actually encourage children to experiment with behaviors which they know are dangerous. Merely knowing that something can be bad for you does not dissuade if life seems bereft of meaning and nobler motivations have not been instilled.

4.4 Propaganda.

These malaises cry out for reform. Yet, aside from the institutional inertia and scientism of the new class of "educrats," reform is hampered by the reactionary use of propaganda to disguise devastating failure as progress. Educators and other culture shapers have learned well from the Marxists that the mere fact that a theory's predictions fail and wreak havoc on society is no reason to discard the theory. The recalcitrant facts can always be massaged. If students are undisciplined and do not learn anything, the solution must be more "relevant" subject matter and more stimulating techniques; it cannot possibly be that students need more effective character formation. If students hate each other for the groups they belong to, this merely reflects "peer pressure," which educators are powerless to affect. Educators should not try to "impose" their values on these students even if it would save careers and lives.

In politics, euphemistic sound-bites replace careful thought. "Once we killed bad men: now we liquidate unsocial elements. Virtue has become *integration* and *diligence dynamism* . . . Most wonderful of all, the virtues of thrift and temperance, and even of ordinary intelligence, are *sales-resistance*."²⁸ Propaganda "plays carefully upon the sins of the people, in ways they will not see, by

articulating for them what they already believed, or half-believed, or wanted to believe. The good propagandist is a disciple of Screwtape."²⁹ When attempting to convince someone that an ideology is progressive, Screwtape advises against arguing for truth. "Make him think it is strong or stark or courageous—that it is the philosophy of the future. That's the sort of thing he cares about."³⁰

5. The Restitution of Man.

"In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults." 1 Cor. 13: 20.

We have seen that Lewis argued for the inculcation of just sentiments in order to develop magnanimity and the virtues that flow from it. Moral psychology has suggested some specific ways in which this can be done. Damon argues that "Bringing to children's awareness what it is like to be in someone else's shoes trains a child to be empathetic."³¹ This would help recover the sense that other people are "fellow passengers" in life's journey, and undermine the ethical egoism prevalent in our society.³² Psychologists believe that a certain amount of empathy is innate, but that "Children whose native empathetic notions are unnurtured or crushed in certain families will grow into dangerous people both to themselves and society."³³ This seems to be what happened in the case of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Thus "The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts."³⁴

This might be done by requiring students to visualize the world from another person's perspective. It can also be achieved through parables, fables and stories which invite the reader to identify with protagonists in the

story.³⁵ The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37) calls one to empathize with the robbery victim, to see one's self-centered neglect for others in the priest and Levite, and to be inspired by the compassion and selflessness of the Good Samaritan. It also highlights the poverty of moral rules without character: the priest and the Levite were experts in the Law, like the man who prompts Jesus's parable by asking "And who is my neighbor?" hoping to limit his responsibilities. As a student confided to Robert Coles, "I've tried to take courses in moral philosophy But I leave the lecture hall and I can see myself as the same."³⁶

If Biblical stories are not allowed, there is a vast stock of heroic literature that can be used. As MacIntyre argues, stories help to define a person's role in society, supplying a vocabulary of appropriate actions and responsibilities. For

man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world . . . that children learn . . . both what a child or parent is, and what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.³⁷

It may be noted that one way of understanding a vocation is as a script defining one's social

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role and moral responsibilities. Stories do not merely tell us about virtue: like a benign infection they become a part of our organism, shaping and defining who we are, and how we look at and feel about the world.

An approach of this kind may help develop noble and just sentiments. Simultaneously, inappropriate sentiments must be restrained. The teacher must be prepared to assert that some sentiments are out of place. In psychological terms "Children who are not taught to delay gratification will in fact have difficult human lives. Children who cannot control impulses are in fact unsocialized beings who are lacking a fundamental prerequisite of human development."³⁸

This approach is unlikely to work unless parents and teachers model the virtues themselves. Their own behavior tells a story which may either communicate an admirable or a weak character which may draw others up or down to its level. Neither heavy-handed authoritarianism nor simple permissiveness is effective. What is needed are people whose strength of character communicates natural authority: "By combining caring with loving discipline, authoritative parents help children to distinguish for themselves their own motivations and habits. Self-discipline becomes second nature to the child, not out of fear of punishment but because of the rewards of delaying gratification and controlling immediate impulses."³⁹ Those who oppose proper, loving discipline of children, not only contradict the Scripture (see for example Hebrews 12: 5-12), they also prevent the formation of self-discipline which leaves the child vulnerable to self-destructive impulses.⁴⁰

A politician also has the opportunity to model character by educating the electorate as to the greater social good. "He or she must stand for principles about what constitutes the

human good, the major one in a governing context being justice, and must be willing to confront those whose vision of humanity centers around injustice and personal gain. Besides a strong sense of justice, virtues of courage and integrity would be important in this regard."⁴¹ Integrity is crucial to leadership because it creates trust that a speaker's words can be treated as honest communication that can be relied on rather than artful propaganda which can be re-interpreted at will on a later occasion.

Conclusion.

Evading the issue of character formation is a disastrous mistake. Civilization is not inevitable but fragile, a tapestry woven together with inspiring stories of virtue. Each one should see his calling as a strand in that tapestry, where it can magnify his talents and better serve the whole. For "He who sets to work on a different strand destroys the whole fabric."⁴² The integrity of the fabric and the integrity of the strand are interdependent.

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Notes

- ¹Carter, *Civility*, 8.
- ²Plowman, "Divinity Dean Sacked for Smut," 19.
- ³Veith, "Forbidding Evangelism."
- ⁴The idea that there are true virtues and also deceptive *simulacra* is emphasized by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*.
- ⁵This term comes from Watkins's *The New Absolutes*.
- ⁶Belz, "Red Handed."
- ⁷Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 35.
- ⁸Plowman, "Faith at Gunpoint."
- ⁹For a contemporary exposition of the doctrine of vocation, see Veith, "Vocation: The Spirituality of Ordinary Life."
- ¹⁰See MacIntyre, "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context," Ch. 3 in *After Virtue*.
- ¹¹Howard, "The Triumphant Vindication of the Body," 139.
- ¹²MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Ch. 2.
- ¹³Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 15.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, 25.
- ¹⁵Veith, "Hating Our Children," 23.
- ¹⁶Jacob Bronowski, quoted in Aeschliman, *The Restitution of Man*, 11.
- ¹⁷Peters, "The War of the Worldviews," 206.
- ¹⁸Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 24.
- ¹⁹Medved and Medved, *Saving Childhood*, 104.
- ²⁰See Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*, 73-74.
- ²¹According to a recent survey by *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, 80 percent of students admit to having cheated on tests. See Colson, "Beating the System," 16.
- ²²Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 25.
- ²³Lewis, "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," 162.
- ²⁴Putman, "The Primacy of Virtue in Children's Moral Development," 175.
- ²⁵Medved and Medved, *Saving Childhood*, 96.
- ²⁶David Martin quoted in Aeschliman, *The Restitution of Man*, 36.
- ²⁷Medved and Medved, *Saving Childhood*, 99.
- ²⁸Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 85.
- ²⁹Mills, "To See Truly through a Glass Darkly," 119.
- ³⁰Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter I, 8.
- ³¹Putman, referring to Damon's *The Moral Child*, in "The Primacy of Virtue in Children's Moral Development," 175.
- ³²Ethical egoism is the view that people *should* act out of self-interest. The origins of the view and methods of undermining it are ably discussed by Putman, "Virtue Theory and the Self: Addressing Ethical Egoism in Our Students."
- ³³Putman, "The Primacy of Virtue in Children's Moral Development," 177.
- ³⁴Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 24.
- ³⁵For more on this approach as a means of pre-evangelism, see my "Fellow Patients in the Same Hospital: Law and Gospel in the Writings of C.S. Lewis."
- ³⁶Coles, *The Call of Stories*, 203.
- ³⁷MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.
- ³⁸This is the view of Garbarino & Bronfengrenner, reported in Putman, "The Primacy of Virtue in Children's Moral Development," 177.
- ³⁹*Ibid.*, 179.
- ⁴⁰See Veith, "Hating Our Children."
- ⁴¹O'Brien and Putman, "Virtue and Politics: The Example of Philip Hart," 169.
- ⁴²Confucius, quoted in a title page of Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*.