Truth and the Problem of a Liberal Tradition

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THE PRECARIOUSNESS of the liberal public order is driven home in the baldness of the self-assertion that it is a tradition which is not a tradition. This gives rise to the improbable expectation that the unfolding of liberal democracy, which the originators considered to require a most fortunate blending of moral and political conditions, can be counted on to continue its autonomic progress indefinitely. It is the one practice which does not need to be sustained through the practice of it. Instead, it provides the overarching neutral framework within which competing traditions of the good must struggle toward realization, but liberalism itself exists in splendid impregnability beyond the fray. That is because there is no liberal good toward which it strives and there are no liberal virtues on which it depends. Liberalism itself is not threatened because it has become a wholly permeable medium.

The bursting of the bubble of liberal neutrality and independence is, as we see in the moral chaos of our society, the core of the crisis currently afflicting it. The increasing inability of liberalism to sustain itself has made it painfully aware of the degree to which it depends on a certain conception of the good and cannot survive if liberals no longer experience this orientation *as* good. Such compulsory self-examination is a necessary first step in the rediscovery of the implicit moral authority still remaining in the liberal framework. It still contains the residue of moral truth that has sustained it from the beginning, and it has shown itself over history to be capable of remarkable efforts of resuscitation. But now it is called to move beyond such *ad hoc* rejuvenations by articulating the existential depth from which it has always drawn its inspiration. The previous liberal strategy of remaining silent about the roots of its own conviction can no longer work because the erosion has now reached the point where skepticism about its convictions is rampant. Is there a liberal good?

The difficulty is that contemporary liberals are not well placed to deal with this question. They have played the neutralist tune for so long that it is doubted that they have any other notes. Indeed, they have shown themselves captive to those very liberal tendencies that in the past have mitigated against any prolonged meditation on what inspired it. An unreflective sense of their own evident rightness and an inclination to believe in historical progress conspired to remove the urgency to attend to the existential underpinnings of liberalism. But now that such comforting illusions have begun to lose their hold, the question is whether liberals are up to the task

of articulating an account of the good that has guided them. Can we expect an evocation of the liberal tradition of the good from thinkers who have never properly understood the nature of a tradition?

Alasdair MacIntyre is not sanguine about the possibility. Liberalism began as the attempt to define an independent morality that would be universally compelling irrespective of circumstances. The result has been that "liberalism, which began as an appeal to alleged principles of shared rationality against what was felt to be the tyranny of tradition, has itself been transformed into a tradition whose continuities are partly defined by the interminability of the debate over such principles."[1] It has become the tradition whose essence is its self-negation as a tradition. This is, as MacIntyre perceptively explains, the function of its emphasis on the heterogeneity of goods, on the individualism of the actor, of the indecisive making and unmaking of decisions, and of the continuous philosophical debate on principles which is always promising but never conclusive. All of the features work to preserve the liberal tradition of autonomous self-determination, but in such a way as to render its validity inherently unstable. What, after all, is the value of promoting self-responsibility if all of the justifications proffered seem to dissolve into incoherence?

Everything turns on the possibility of liberalism recognizing what it means to acknowledge its own dependence on a tradition. It would have to acknowledge that liberalism's own failure to elaborate a self-evident neutral ground is "by far the strongest reason that we can actually have for asserting that there is no such neutral ground."[2] Nothing can be established on the basis of its plausibility to individuals of every conceivable persuasion and none. Nor can we expect that the strenuous efforts required to sustain a liberal democratic order will be forth-coming if its appeal is only to the mixture of episodic altruism and recurrent self-interest that is the prevailing image of its citizens. Moral and political order does not exist in the bare skeleton of promises and contracts. It is rather the living conviction of the necessity of having and abiding by agreements that makes them possible and is the real source of their life. The explication of a liberal order consists in the thematization of the living tradition that underpins it.

The difficulty with this recognition is that its articulation will involve a transformation of the liberal self-understanding as a non-tradition. It will necessitate the recognition that liberalism can only be sustained if it recognizes itself as a tradition which is willing to defend itself against the alternative traditions posed against it. The way to consolidate liberal convictions is not to abandon the conflict of positions as an irresolvable clash of perspectives, but to engage in the dialogue as rationally and comprehensively as possible. MacIntyre clarifies the nature of a rational tradition as one that is willing to confront epistemological crises, acknowledge what is valid in the critiques of its rivals, rearticulate its own principles in such a way as to take account of them, and then elaborate an account of order that demonstrates its superiority over its rivals. He concedes that the dialogue does not always extend so far, but he insists that the possibility of its rational resolution must be preserved.

The alternative is the perspectival claim that no tradition can vindicate its claim to truth. That recurrently liberal proclivity "fails to recognize how integral the conception of truth is to tradition-constituted forms of enquiry. It is this which leads perspectivists to suppose that one could temporarily adopt the standpoint of a tradition and then exchange it for another, as one might wear first one costume and then another,

or as one might act one part in one play and then a quite different part in a quite different play."[3] That is the pathology of the "nomadic thinker," whose homelessness would prove fatal if it engulfs a whole society. What sustains a tradition is the conviction that it is true or right and that cannot survive if the possibility of truth itself is abandoned. Truth must remain the measure, even if it is not fully attainable, if the seriousness of the quest is to be preserved.

The great strength of MacIntyre's analysis is his insistence on the presupposition of truth as a necessary precondition for the viability of a tradition. "Only those whose tradition allows for the possibility of its hegemony being put in question can have rational warrant for asserting such a hegemony. And only those traditions whose adherents recognize the possibility of untranslatability into their own language-in-use are able to reckon adequately with that possibility."[4] If liberalism bases itself on the confession of the impossibility of truth, then its public hegemony is a hegemony of power and like all such assertions inherently unstable. It cannot rest its authority on the claim to truth but must perpetually guard against the raising of the question of its own legitimacy. Only a tradition that is willing to put its own hegemony to the test of truth can acquire the stability of rational self-confidence. With traditions as with everything else under the sun, only those who are willing to lose their lives will save them.

The challenge is to admit that the testing of the truth of traditions opens us up to the testing of ourselves as well. It involves the more substantive risk of our own self-exposure in light of the truth disclosed by traditions. Not only do we test the traditions but the traditions in turn test us. That acknowledgment is crucial to the possibility of establishing their claim to authority. There is no neutral language into which all of the rival claims to truth can be translated; the greater cogency of one calls into question the validity of an other. There is no Archimedean sky-box from which to view the debate. We are involved with it and it is the coherence, rationality, and reality of our way of life that is at stake. The only means available to us for rendering a judgment about the truth or falsity of the various positions is that which emerges through our own struggle toward truth. The only method available to us is the testing of the claims in the juxtaposition of what Dostoevsky called the truth of "living life."

The notion that we are in possession of a means of evaluating truth that does not involve our own inchoate struggle toward it is one of the great distorting conceptions of our world. "This belief in its ability to understand everything from human culture and history, no matter how apparently alien, is itself one of the definite beliefs of the culture of modernity."[5] It is evident in the conceit that all of the richness of traditional meaning can be captured through our meager placement of them in museums, in lists of great books, or under the impoverished rubrics of aesthetics. The governing assumption is that all of their insights can be absorbed in ways that do not fundamentally challenge the shallowness of our own world. The culminating expression of this approach is reached in contemporary deconstructionism which no longer even regards texts as a whole, and permits us to interpret them freely without any controlling reference to historical context or authorial intention.

Recognition of their untranslatability into contemporary language pulls us up sharply against the limitations of our modern world view. It reminds us of the existential depth from which all symbolization arises and knocks the supports from the modern conceit that we can have a language that presupposes nothing. All constructions of meaning, even

the minimal constitution of liberalism, arise from the way of life through which its meaning is rendered transparent. Without reference to the practice of the tradition we can neither make sense of nor sustain the meaning subscribed. The hermeneutical challenge becomes, then, not that of finding a philosophical Esperanto in which the least common denominator can be expressed, but of testing that our own existential-symbolic horizon is rich enough to include all of the types it seeks to interpret. If our own tradition of meaning is not up to the level of the texts we attempt to read then we face an impasse. It can only be broken if we permit the texts of our inquiry to expand our horizons sufficiently to include them.

At that point we will, in MacIntyre's conception, have taken seriously the nature of a tradition. We will have entered at least imaginatively into the way of life of a tradition, and acquired the basis from which to understand the rationality that forms its coherence. Rather than going along with the typical liberal tactic of "reformulating quarrels and conflicts with liberalism, so that they appear to have become debates within liberalism,"[6] we will have taken the first steps to put liberalism itself to the test and thereby evoke its own living foundations. That will be the indispensable means by which substance is restored or perhaps rediscovered in the hitherto hollow appearance of liberalism. The way will then lie open to the recognition that liberalism is a tradition and that it is sustained principally through its capacity to evoke existential order within its adherents.

The story of liberalism has been the story of its progressive amnesia toward its own sources. The sequel of its recovery must follow the correlative path of an anamnestic rediscovery of its own inspiration. As Oakeshott and Arendt, and Rawls and Rorty in their own way, all emphasize, liberalism is a practice which is sustained by the virtues endemic to the practice itself. More important than any principles or foundations beyond it, is the reality constituted through the engagement with individual and communal self-government itself. That is what forms the core of the liberal tradition and its continuance depends on that recognition. Like every tradition it must insist that it can only be understood from within and refuse to concede the interpretation placed on it from the outside. Participation in it, also like other traditions, must be conditioned on the ability and willingness to enter into its way of life. The exercise of authority must be strictly limited to those who have clearly demonstrated their virtue in sustaining its order. Only in this way is it possible to sustain an order which, not being something that can be maintained indifferently by every human type, depends for its flourishing on the capacity to evoke those qualities in its citizens that are its living foundation.

The problem with this recommendation that liberalism acknowledge its own dependence on a tradition is that those who make it do not seem to take it seriously. MacIntyre, for example, does not appear to believe that liberalism is capable of benefiting from it. The liberal mindset is too unalterably opposed to the whole notion of a tradition for it ever to acknowledge its own self-constitution in depth. Instead he looks to the liberal encounter with more substantively rational traditions, such as the Thomist, to bring about first "an awareness of the specific character of their own incoherence and then accounting for the particular character of this incoherence by its metaphysical, moral, and political scheme of classification and explanation."[7] This is also the reason why he is somewhat vague on how this transformation of liberalism into one of the earlier and more coherent traditions is possi-

ble. He allows as it is likely to come about only through a fundamental "conversion" since it will involve the detached liberal self becoming "something other than it now is, a self able to acknowledge by the way it expresses itself in language standards of rational enquiry as something other than expressions of will and preference."[8] How such a conversion might come about and how the process might be set in motion are considerations beyond the limits of MacIntyre's reflections.

In this regard he is representative of a very formidable movement of thought that has been gaining momentum since the beginning of the century. The discovery of the richness and depth of premodern philosophical traditions, especially the classical and medieval, has convinced many thinkers that only the infusion of truth from these sources can save liberalism. Left to itself it remains irretrievably bankrupt. This is particularly the conclusion of the generation of European émigrés, such as Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, who witnessed the corruption and disintegration of liberal democratic regimes before the onslaught of totalitarianism. Arendt too often sounds as if she is speaking from a Greek perspective, with her emphasis on the immortality of publicly effective action. The long-standing Catholic critique of liberalism from Leo XIII to John Paul II is rooted in the conviction of the superiority of natural law and solidaristic perspectives over liberal atomistic individualism.

They are all friendly critics of liberalism in the sense that, unlike the now largely defunct revolutionary ideologies, they wish to see it improved rather than abolished. Like the Canadian critic, George Parkin Grant, they concede that liberalism is "the only political language that can sound a convincing moral note in our public realms."[9] But they cannot see any way that the moral residue of liberalism might be coherently expand-

ed to secure it against its inherently centrifugal tendencies. Only the traditions with "more substantive presuppositions of truth" possess the requisite durability to withstand the corrosive relativism of egalitarianism. A tradition requires the fortitude to be able to insist that not everything within it is equally accessible to everyone, if it is to preserve the conditions in which the substantive rationality of practice can be maintained. In most respects liberalism struck its most serious friendly critics as a poor candidate for the position. It is simply too difficult for the emphasis on individual autonomy to be corralled by the authoritative requirements of a practice.

Yet despite the evident merit of this assessment, it is difficult also to avoid the suspicion that it is also tinged with a certain utopianism. True, the charges directed against liberalism are largely valid, and the greater cogency of premodern spiritual and philosophical traditions is indisputable, but is there not an element of escapism secreted in the very heightening of the contrast between them? A trenchant critique of liberalism is an indispensable first step, but can the meditation afford to rest there? It is almost as if the critics have given up entirely on the effort to remediate liberalism from within and are now confined to recording its inexorable descent into the maelstrom. One is struck by the absence of much serious reflection on how liberal self-understanding might be modified to accommodate their insights. It is almost as if they have already abandoned the effort at remediation.

This is a perpetually tempting possibility especially for those who have reached a personal viewpoint of greater meaning and depth. The task, then, becomes that of finding a *modus vivendi* that will enable the life of reason to be carried on in a world that is pervaded by unreason; the challenge to do what one can to bring about a growth of the soul

within that world is no longer theirs. The tendency to dismiss responsibility is increased by the very power of their critique of liberalism which strongly reinforces the sense of the critics' own superiority to it. In reading MacIntyre or Strauss or Voegelin or Arendt one comes away with a very strong sense of the power of the Platonic or Thomist viewpoint on the world, and how paltry the confused gropings of modern liberal philosophy really are by comparison. There is little encouragement to consider the substantive achievements of liberalism or to think through the way it might be internally redirected to overcome its manifest defects. Even the realization that liberalism is the only option available to us for the foreseeable future is not often made.

That is what creates the air of unreality that Rorty has pilloried as "terminal wistfulness" in the various shades of communitarianism. Without some concrete indication of how liberalism might be nudged toward the transformation, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that it has all been merely an exercise in longing for an irrevocably vanished past. After all, what is the purpose of reflecting on the superiority of the premodern traditions if it is not to draw them into that world as a source of order? If that is the intention, then some attention must be given to the question of how far liberalism is capable of absorbing such insights and how they might be organically grafted onto it. A mere assertion of premodern truth, without any attempt to mediate it in language that renders it minimally intelligible from a liberal perspective, would be futile. A way must be found to give the philosophic-Christian tradition a public voice, otherwise it will go the way of all traditions compelled to shrink to a wholly private level.

I have long been convinced that such a way is available, although not sufficiently recognized, in the traditionalist critique itself. The very act of critique contains within it the implication of what is required to remediate it. By undertaking the resistance and diagnosis of what is at fault within liberalism we correlatively evoke a vision of the alternative that would overcome it. The therapeutic growth of the soul is the means by which disorder is defeated by order. That process is, moreover, not simply one that occurs in the critics of liberalism, but is, as we have seen, an unfolding that has also emerged from the crisis within liberalism itself. The analysis of the critics and the self-diagnosis of liberalism are convergent, even if they are not coincident. It provides the opportunity for the critics to inject their more profound diagnosis at a stage within the intraliberal conversation that will enable that dialogue to be moved forward toward an horizon beyond contemporary liberalism. This suggestion is simply another way of stating MacIntyre's account of how one tradition manages to integrate its rivals "in such a way as both to correct in each that which by its own standards could be shown to be defective or unsound and to remove from each, in a way justified by that correction, that which barred them from reconciliation."[10]

The difference is that I do not take liberalism to be an unalterably fixed quantity. I take seriously the suggestion that it is a tradition and that, like all traditions, it rests not on its overt formulations but on the underlying resonances that give its principles life. That means that the possibility remains of expanding the admittedly limited existential base that now underpins liberal order. By building on the fragments that still constitute a liberal tradition it is possible to discover the firm reality on which it is then possible to build a greater development. Anything else, as Oakeshott has reminded us, will be utterly ineffectual. It would only comprise the erection of a superstructure on a foundation of air, unconnected with

the real living world of human beings today. Instead, a meditative expansion must take place within liberalism. Beginning with a reflection on the state of crisis within liberal theory and practice, it can move through a consideration of the nature and source of the crisis to a realization of the direction that must be pursued in its resolution. The crucial thing is that we at no point depart from the self-understanding of liberalism. The outcome is one that, even if it is several stages removed from contemporary liberalism, is intimately connected to it as its own meditative unfolding. It cannot be disavowed by the liberal mind and it provides a trajectory of the way by which liberalism itself might be transformed.

The first stage consists of the self-recognition of the crisis, and the outline of the parameters in which liberalism is both an enduring source of moral authority and yet incapable of acknowledging the depth of conviction from which it springs. The next stage is to delve more deeply into the liberal tradition to discover what resources might be available to renew it from within. This will begin naturally with a reflection on the source of the liberal contradiction between its convictions and their acknowledgment, which seems to be the core of the instability of the whole construction. Why is it that liberalism is so constitutionally incapable of mounting a coherent defense of the principles that it so manifestly holds? With that deeper understanding of its nature in mind it will then be possible in the third stage of the meditation to take account of the limitations and strengths that conjoin to form the liberal tradition. In that way we will have a means of exploring the extent to which the limits can be expanded and the strengths exploited to constitute a more substantively moral liberalism. The conversion that MacIntyre and others look to must, like all true conversions, occur within the soul of the penitent.

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, 1988), 335. **2.** *Ibid.*, 346. **3.** *Ibid.*, 367. **4.** *Ibid.*, 388. **5.** *Ibid.*, 385. **6.** *Ibid.*, 392. **7.** *Ibid.*, **8.** *Ibid.*, 396-97. **9.** George Parkin Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Notre Dame, 1985), 5. **10.** Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, 1990), 123.