



Politics and the Pursuit of Excellence

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Abstract: Everyone applauds the pursuit of excellence, but the major kinds of political ethics agree that it cannot be an affair of the state because that would be an infringement of autonomy. Civil rights, to be sure, must guarantee individual freedom, but economic arrangements inevitably are conducive to a certain kind of life. Capitalist society as it now exists favors a life of consumption that renders bodies and minds slack and distended. We have to take responsibility for this state of affairs and change it so that it encourages the pursuit of excellence whose standards are not really controversial. Education and higher education in particular, has a special opportunity and responsibility in helping to bring about such a reform.

Keywords: Education, excellence, capitalism, consumption, virtue, politics.

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Introduction

No one is against the pursuit of excellence—well almost no one. Mediocrity has had its defenders. Senator Roman Hruska in 1970 claimed that it was “entitled to a little representation” on the U.S. Supreme Court. Yet the public or political advancement of excellence has a more serious rival, viz., autonomy. The two dominant theories of political ethics agree that autonomy should prevail in this contest. The first of these theories is the ethics of rights and liberties, represented historically by Immanuel Kant and in our time by John Rawls. The argument, not surprisingly, is to the effect that making the pursuit of excellence a matter of politics is an infringement of an individual’s rights and liberties.

The other leading theory is the ethics of pleasure and prosperity. The great historical representative is John Stuart Mill. An influential contemporary proponent is Richard Posner. Here the argument is that individuals are the best

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judges of what makes them prosper and happy, and so letting individuals decide what's good for them produces the greatest amount of happiness. Both schools of thought agree then, if for different reasons, that the state should not promote a vision of the good life. It should be neutral and merely provide means that can be used for whatever ends an individual chooses.

There is, to be sure, a minority school that advocates the political advancement of moral excellence and virtue. The great ancestor is Aristotle, and George Sher is an able contemporary proponent. He makes three helpful points—first, that the state always and already enforces some standards of excellence in manners and morals; second, that there are widely shared and compelling virtues that the state should promote and could promote without much controversy, and third, that autonomy is better protected by guarantees of rights and liberties than by neutrality (Sher, 1997).

These points are well-taken, but they also make you wonder why they haven't been more influential, given their evident reasonableness. Politically, in fact, perfectionism, as this position is called in philosophy, is a perilous position to take. If a politician so much as hints at the lack of common excellence, he is called an elitist and has much to answer for.

Evidently, neutralism is arrayed with the colors of plausibility, tolerance, diversity, and pluralism. People should be free to think, to say, and to read whatever they want. They should be at liberty to move wherever they please and to associate with whomever they choose. They should be able to listen to whatever music they like, to eat whatever food they prefer, and to spend their leisure time however they see fit. How could one possibly object?

Plausibility and Ignorance

What we need to understand is that a crucial divide is being crossed in this plausible list of rights and liberties. On the one side is a region that can and must be left unrestricted, the space of civil rights. On the other side are economic arrangements that inevitably have a definite shape whether we like it or not, or more to the point here, whether we realize it or not. They can take lots of possible shapes, and we can think of them being ordered along a spectrum that goes from the communal at one end to the capitalist at the other.

The Missoula Valley went from one to the other in the space of a century. The Native Americans who came here first had a communal order of life that reflected the experience and wisdom of many millennia. It was forcibly displaced by the European communities that were different in many ways and yet still communal. When in our imagination we trace the development of Missoula from its early European settlers in the late nineteenth century to what Missoula is today, we plausibly see a trajectory that goes from hardships and confinements to prosperity and liberty.

People, to begin with, were confined in their human associations. You could not ignore your neighbors; you depended on them and they on you in emergencies. You could not hide in a cloak of anonymity at the store when that was the only place to get provisions and the owner soon got to know you and your habits. You were confined by a texture that was woven of the land, the seasons, and the community. You had the right to read whatever you liked, but in the winter of 1860, Granville Stuart and his brother had to cross the Blackfoot, the Clark Fork, and the Bitterroot and spend half of their money on five books so they had something to read (Stuart, 1925, pp. 159 -161). For entertainment, the settlers in the Rattlesnake Valley had to find a fiddler and arrange for a dance at the schoolhouse. As for the choice of foods, today's farmers market more or less traces what was available by way of fruits and vegetables in the course of the seasons.

Capitalism, in the sense that I'm using it here, is the radical expansion of the market system. Here again, plausibility spreads a veil of ignorance over the crucial developments. The unfettered exchange of goods leads to efficiencies that greatly enlarge the availability of goods—nothing could be more obvious. What we fail to recognize as the inevitable complement of this platitude are the radical changes on the ground that are the conditions for the expansion of the market.

The market for wheat is your village as long as it is connected to the next village by nothing more than a rutted mule track. It takes reasonable roads for a regional wheat market to develop, and it remains limited by the number of days a farmer is able to spend on the road with his team of oxen, mules, or horses. Coal, steel, and steam were the crucial elements of the Industrial Revolution, and the railroad, which first reached Missoula in 1883, was the most obvious agent of change from community to capitalism.

The subsequent transformation was a gradual process that has been continuing to this day. We're all aware of the blessings it has borne over the last generation, the completion of the Interstate Highway System and the expansion of air travel; much quicker delivery of goods; more particularly a second car in the family, colored television, personal computers, plasma screens, a greater variety of foods. Yet there have been subtractions too: The disappearance of corner stores in the neighborhoods, of drugstores, hardware stores, and railway stations from downtown; of breweries and timber mills; of movie theaters.

The drift from community to capitalism has attenuated our engagement with the land, the seasons, and people. Getting to Seattle is much easier and quicker than it was thirty years ago, but it is also less memorable. With air conditioning and all-wheel drive, the heat of the summer and the challenge of winter have been lessened. The anonymity of the Safeway or Costco stores has disburdened us from having to explain why we're looking so depressed or why our children have left.

The State of Excellence

A certain sort of liberty and prosperity has grown, and a kind of engagement and vigor has been diminished. What effect has this shift had on the excellence of our lives? Social reality is endlessly complex, and within it there continues to be much fortitude and grace among individuals and in families. So it may seem impossible or, at any rate, presumptuous to judge the overall quality of American life. Then again, such restraint may amount to irresponsibility if in fact there are troubling matters of fact that we could change for the better.

There are such matters of fact as regards the physical and intellectual well-being of American society. And by what standards of well-being? Historical comparisons are instructive, but not decisive. We need to judge our condition by our possibilities, not by differences with our ancestors. Stuart Granville in the winter of 1860 could not be held responsible for being up on the details of presidential politics. But we can and should be on the prospects of the President's policies.

What then is the quality of the common physical and intellectual condition in light of what it could be? The news on the physical well-being of the American population is not good. One third is obese, and two thirds are overweight. The major diseases we battle—cancer and heart disease—are largely self-inflicted by too much eating and too little exercise. The news on the general state of knowledge and awareness is just as bad. Fundamental knowledge of physics, biology, geography, history, economics, and politics is thin or lacking entirely (Carpini & Keeter, 2008; Shenkman, 2008).

There has been an abdication of political responsibility for the means and the ends of capitalism. But the prospects of responsible attention differ very much as regards the machinery on one side and the fruits of capitalism on the other. If we think of the machinery of capitalism as the ensemble of structures and organizations that sustain and improve daily life, the recent lack of responsibility is an exception though the inattention to global warming has been long-term and appalling. The crisis of the capitalist machinery, at any rate, has our full and best attention. It will be fixed.

We are determined to take responsibility for the machinery of capitalism, but it still seems that we don't have to and shouldn't take responsibility for its effects on the pursuit of excellence. There is, after all, nothing in advanced capitalism that requires people to consume large amounts of processed foods and to spend large amounts of time sitting and watching television or playing with their electronic gadgets. That some people make unfortunate decisions is the price of freedom, one might say.

The problem with this argument is that not just some, but that most people eat too much and exercise too little and that their actions are not based on actual decisions, but constitute the default behavior in contemporary culture. People do not decide to avoid the encounters at the corner store, the mingling with the

crowd at the Fox Theater, the appreciation of the first fresh vegetables in the spring. The corner stores and the Fox Theater are no more, and fresh vegetables are always available. Our places and seasons of engagement did not vanish of themselves. They were displaced and erased by the much more attractive and abundant goods that the capitalist machinery has been producing.

Implicitly we understand the capitalist system very well. We pay our dues to its machinery by faithfully showing up for work and doing a decent job. When we leave work, we enter the large opening of the horn of plenty where whatever hearts and minds want is plentifully available. The heart is desirous, the mind is curious. My heart desires, and the human heart has always desired, warmth, food, sex, and entertainment. These pleasures were once apportioned by a context of immediate engagements with reality and direct encounters with people. Now that they are available free of tangible burdens and personal obligations, they are disproportionately and debilitatingly consumed. As a result, we are becoming physically slack and shapeless. My mind is curious for news and entertainment. Curiosity was once the careful awareness of the environment, of the ways game was moving, of the time berries were ripening, and then of the place where the wheat was sprouting and of the time when it had to be harvested. And there was the vigilance of dangerous men and beasts and the hope for bearers of distant news.

The environment of prairies and fields and of travellers and enemies has been replaced by the productive machinery of capitalism. Its utilities, factories, and offices constitute the environment I have to come to terms with. It's a context that, apart from my particular job, is impenetrable to direct acquaintance and familiarity. What do I know about the places and procedures that have produced my potato chips? How could I possibly understand the engineering of an airplane? Should I be worried about my ignorance? I may not know how the FDA and the FAA are protecting me, I may not know what their initials stand for; in fact I may not know of their existence. What most of us share is an implicit trust in the reliability of the capitalist machinery. I do decent work at my job, I expect everyone else to do the same, and my trust is warranted by the evidence of more than a hundred years of basic security and growing prosperity. It seems both hard and unnecessary to extend the scope of my awareness beyond the requirements of my work and my leisure and beyond my trust that both are part of a functioning system. How then do I satisfy my mind's curiosity? With pieces of information that have the pleasant availability of potato chips and beer. As a result, our minds are becoming as slack and shapeless as our bodies.

How bad is the situation? Not so bad that it couldn't be much worse. People in this country are overwhelmingly decent, hard-working, and law-abiding. They profess to be happy. Medical care helps them to live a relatively long life. More to the point here, the situation is not so bad that it will run itself into the ground morally or materially. Hence people concerned about the pursuit of excellence

will wait in vain for a collapse that will vindicate their apprehension and make a nation turn its lonely eyes to them. Thus, if our situation were a fact of nature, we should cheerfully put up with it. But it is in fact a fact of culture, the result of energetic enterprises, we, as a society, have pursued for more than a century. Given the cultural situation, however, people respond naturally. They do what's needed to maintain the system, and they consume what the system offers them in abundance.

Taking Responsibility

Our situation, though materially stable, is morally deplorable. We as a people are responsible for it. We put a system in place that's anything but neutral. It's conducive to a certain behavior, and unless we have been favored by unusual talents or experiences, we comply with its inducements. But to say that we are responsible is to speak ambiguously. There are choices and responsibilities *within* the system. They are heavily constrained, and it's unreasonable and uncharitable to insist that people individually undertake heroic efforts against the constraints.

We are also responsible *for* the system. The only way of taking on and taking care of that responsibility is politics. The fate of politics and the fate of excellence are one and the same. Given the tribulations of excellence, it's no wonder that politics is in trouble as well. It has been displaced by capitalist maintenance. When the capitalist machinery is sputtering, political divisions become less relevant. There is agreement by most liberals and conservatives that a vigorous repair is called for right now and that politics has to be left out of it. To be sure, decisive action *is* needed, and it should not be derailed by bickering and posturing. But it's sad that this has become the meaning of politics—bickering and posturing. There is no term or tradition other than politics for the enterprise that is needed—joint and deliberate action so to order our affairs that they are conducive to the good life of every citizen.

Democracy is based on the recognition that all citizens are capable of participating in this enterprise. Democracy has a form and content. We can take satisfaction from the fact that the forms of our democracy are in fair shape. People have access to what they need to know, and they can make themselves heard in generally free and fair elections. They are able and sometimes willing to bring about significant change. It's the content that needs reform. The political agenda needs to be enlarged. The challenge is to go beyond the items that come *under* the heading of the capitalist system and its requirements of security and prosperity. The heading *itself* needs to be put on the agenda. The system of capitalism itself needs to be considered and acted on.

This may sound like radical left rhetoric, but that's not what I mean. The challenge of recognizing and taking responsibility for the character of our lives can only be met if we have a standpoint that brings the whole relevantly into view. There are several such points of view—the secular society, the information age, globalization, technology, and others. Most of them unfortunately let you sweep past the layers of reality that most powerfully and least visibly shape the conduct

of daily life, the layer of conveyances that move us around, the layer of structures that shelter us, the layer of goods that feed and entertain us.

Capitalism provides a helpful perspective because of the width and depth of vision it opens up. As for width, Capitalism has joined several currents into an irresistible flood of transformation that Marx and Engels memorably described in 1848 already (Marx & Engels, 1999[1848]). Capitalism has fused the energy of merchants with the ingenuity of inventors, the insight of scientists, and, to include the darker forces, the desires, the greed, and the envy of individuals. It all turns on the market as the pivot of allocation and distribution. The perspective of capitalism opens up the depth of material transformation as I have tried to show, and it begins, at least, to open up the question of moral norms of excellence.

Standards of Excellence

I have so far argued that we as a society are deeply implicated in the quality of the lives of individuals, that the quality of our lives is much lower than it needs and ought to be, and that we have to take responsibility for that deplorable state of affairs. Capitalism was the perspective that has made all this visible. The question now is what to do about it, and to answer it we need to be clearer about standards of excellence.

There is a commonsensical distinction between moral standards of excellence such as honesty and generosity and nonmoral standards of excellence such as intelligence or beauty. The difference is that you're responsible to or for the moral standards. If you're not honest or generous, it's your fault. But you can't make yourself more intelligent or good-looking than you are. The distinction makes sense because some people meet a standard of the one kind while they entirely fail some standard of the other kind. Our distinctions have to track these differences, and there are after all very intelligent people who are extremely selfish. But common sense only takes us so far. Self-seeking intelligence is no longer a kind of excellence. It has become tainted and repulsive. Intelligence needs generosity to come into its own as a form of excellence. Conversely, generosity bereft of intelligence is in danger of being aimless or bizarre. The moral standards without the nonmoral standards become pinched or silly; the nonmoral standards without the moral ones can become toxic or monstrous. Hence we should think of the virtues that realize the standards of excellence not as building blocks that are shaped separately and then assembled into the edifice of the good person. Better to think of the virtues as features of the good person where, if one feature is disfigured, all of them suffer.

The pursuit of excellence, then, requires a picture of the good person and the good society. Here too it helps to take a revealing point of view, the parental perspective, the standpoint of the selfless and benevolent observer. What kind of person would we want our daughter to be under the best of circumstances?

First, we would want her to be at home in the world. Ignorance is confining and reduces our responses to the vagaries of zealotry and hostility. We want her to understand the world in its crucial dimensions—the most fundamental building blocks of reality and the ways in which they came to be and were gathered into

the world we know today; the important features of the planet we inhabit; the way life developed on that planet; the major cultures of the human family; the origin and development of the nation we're citizens of; and finally the moral and political norms that have a claim on each of us.

Second, we would want her to be a vigorous person, athletic and confident.

Third, she should be generous, willing and able to have deep and enduring friendships and, above all, to find a partner with whom to share her life.

Fourth and finally, we would want her to be steeped and skilled in the life of the spirit—the arts, the letters, and the sacred.

Our parental instincts are confirmed by the nearly universal experiences and traditions of the human family. Almost all cultures value the four features of the good person I've just sketched and have established terms for them. In the classical western tradition these are the three familiar virtues of wisdom, courage, and friendship. The fourth, once part of classical wisdom, of Medieval faith, and of indigenous spirituality I will call grace.

The selfless and benevolent wishes of parents for their children are also endorsed by the social sciences. Their findings show that dedication to the four virtues is rewarded with enduring happiness, the kind of well-being we gratefully affirm on thoughtful consideration.

The Politics of Excellence

Now how do we act on these considerations politically? "The good of politics," Aristotle tells us, "is human excellence," and not just the individual's excellence "for evidently the good society is a greater and more perfect thing to attain and to maintain."² Aristotle also understood that the teaching and preaching of the virtues would for the most part be ineffective, and the enforcement of the virtues by the authorities would be odious. What is needed, he recognized, are appropriate institutions, "the right order" he called it, established by law³.

The Aristotelian insights agree with what I have said about the capitalist system. It is conducive to a certain kind of behavior, but it is not coercive. The authorities don't check on your habits to make sure you're eating Big Macs and spend enough time watching television. The good society would be the mirror image of the unreconstructed capitalist society. It would encourage, but not enforce, a life of excellence. The political task, then, is to reform the current social system so that the practice of the virtues would be a more natural and normal way of life.

Beginning with wisdom, we need to ask: What arrangements need to be put in place so that the pursuit of wisdom would be favored? Wisdom is insight into the ways the world hangs together, discernment of what truly matters in the world, and a source of guidance for the perplexed. Whether such wisdom is at all possible today is an open question, and if it is, forcibly imposing it on everyone would be odious as Aristotle said. But he also understood that wisdom depends on

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094 b.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b-1180a.

knowledge⁴. What we must provide, then, are the elements of wisdom—knowledge of how the world hangs together and knowledge of the moral norms that have a claim on everyone. Meeting these obligations is a matter of education. In this country education is decentralized. We do not have a federal Secretary of Culture who decides what is to be taught across the United States. Decentralization nominally goes all the way down to school districts and colleges.

Thus higher education has both an opportunity and an obligation. We are helped in meeting that obligation by a great tradition whose very purpose it has been to give content to the parental hopes that our children become knowledgeable citizens of the world. It's the tradition of general education. What should it contain? Instruction in the rudiments of astrophysics and evolutionary theory; in global geography and culture; in the history of this country; in the workings of the economy; and in the norms and justifications of human rights and democracy.

If the parental perspective has not persuaded you that your child and in fact everyone's children should know these things, consider the hermeneutics of embarrassment. Imagine a friend of yours reports on a conversation with a recent graduate of the University where you studied or teach and tells you with dismay that our newly minted alum believed the world was created one hundred thousand years ago, that he had never heard of the Louisiana Purchase, and that he could not explain what human rights are. Wouldn't you be embarrassed and call for reforms?

In 1945, Harvard published a landmark of general education, *General Education in a Free Society*, the celebrated "Red Book" (Harvard Committee, 1945). It was a response to the devastations of fascism and communism, but a response as well to the looseness at Harvard of what was then called a "liberal education." The antidote was the rock-ribbed Core Curriculum. Its fate over the last half century bespeaks the triumph of machinery over excellence, of means over ends, of procedure over substance, and of skills over content.

It's evident that in general education the pattern of capitalism has overtaken the pursuit of excellence. Let's teach our students the procedures of science and history. The content will take care of itself. Let's worry about the functions and features of digital television and plasma screens. What people watch is no one's concern. The plausibility of these arguments and the evasion of responsibility are the same in both cases. We at The University of Montana are doing a little better than Harvard thanks to the dedication of some of our best colleagues. But we're not doing well enough. Perhaps we have unlearned to be embarrassed. What we need is the courage to tell our students: This you must know.

Turning then to courage, we have to remember that the proper setting for this virtue has worried philosophers since Aristotle's time. The anxiety became acute when the progress of capitalism began to remove one challenge to courage after another. In 1896, William James looked anxiously for "The Moral Equivalent of

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 981a.

War" (James, 1962 [1910]) Today conservative critics blame the liberal nanny state for establishing "a risk-free society" that leads to "a state of moral obesity," as Roger Scruton put it (Scruton, 1999).

So how do we restore a setting for courage? Forget about seatbelts, abolish the Food and Drug Administration, and abandon what health insurance there is? The conservative worries overlook a test of fortitude that most of us fail most of the time—to get off the couch and out of the house to walk, to run, to play basketball, to go skiing, hiking, or hunting. It's evidently a significant challenge since most of us are unequal to it. Again, we must remember that this wide-spread apathy is the default behavior in a culture that does not just provide security, as it should, but promotes comfort and consumption above all.

More of the national wealth, then, needs to be spent on the public goods that invite physical engagement and less on the production of yet more seductive and disabling commodities. Political decisions on taxation, transportation, zoning, and public lands are always in part decisions on whether our tangible environment will encourage activity or passivity. Unintended economic events have shown how inconspicuously and powerfully they can change our behavior (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Gasoline at five dollars a gallon makes us walk and bike more. A recession makes us turn to simpler and more engaging pleasures⁵. What economic vagaries can do unintentionally, we ought to do deliberately through politics.

Friendship, if we follow Aristotle, is in its most important sense the profound and ennobling bond between two people, what we today call marriage. It's not as firm and deep today as Aristotle thought it should be. There is not much in our culture that counsels two persons to be careful and faithful to each other. Too many enticements and obligations pull us away, not just from our beloved, but from what ever so briefly occupies us. Most of those distractions are electronic, and we, as a society, are busy filling every calm or secluded space with the affordances of information and entertainment. That's a toxic environment for friendship. Aristotelian friendship is being dissolved by your friends on Facebook, and politics has been deeply implicated in the defacement of friendship. Politics needs to favor places where face to face attention is favored, places like walkable neighborhoods, concert halls, theaters, and sanctuaries, classrooms free of Wi-Fi, playing fields, and running trails.

The virtue of grace needs such venues, but it needs more. The venues have to be filled with life. There has to be support for arts, letters, and athletics, both in education and performance, and there needs to be continuing support for the devotion to the sacred, be that divinity or humanity.

⁵ See Jennifer Saranow Schultz "The Link Between Frugality and Health," New York Times on the web, 26 May 2010 <http://bucks.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/26/the-link-between-frugality-and-health/> (accessed on 30 May 2010).

Conclusion

Implied in all this is the need for a new political virtue, the virtue of understanding and responsibly shaping the social and physical structures that bank and direct the ordinary course of daily life. Let's call that virtue design. If we were to embrace it, the fortunes of wisdom, courage, friendship, and grace might improve. These are personal or private virtues in the sense that a person could acquire them on her own if against the flow of current culture. Not so for the virtues of justice and stewardship. Your individual efforts to be fair to others and careful of the environment are laudable, but by themselves they are inconsequential. Justice and stewardship are public or political virtues that stand or fall with what we do jointly (see Borgmann 2006)

My argument has been that the public or political virtues—justice, stewardship, and design—are needed to give the personal or private virtues a chance to flourish on a larger scale. But the converse is true as well. The personal virtues are needed to invigorate and redeem politics. Consider the moral insufficiency of justice and stewardship. You could have a socially just and environmentally sustainable society where, but for an elite, mental and physical apathy would persist. The fabric of society needs to be not just evened out and rendered green; it needs to be enlivened with friendship and grace. Aristotle thought of friendship as a concentric structure. At the heart of it is friendship in the narrow sense of two persons casting their lots together in the common pursuit of moral excellence. This is where the claims of justice are strongest⁶. But from there, friendship and justice radiate outward in what, following Aristotle, we've come to call civic friendship. We learn to love and be loved, to care and to be patient in marriage (to include gay marriage). It's the source of strength we need to give social justice greater warmth and scope.

For environmentalists, stewardship has always been more than the determination to make whatever we're doing now more sustainable. They have been concerned to make our relationship to the world more reverent and consoling. This is a hard thing to accomplish without us having learned a regard for the sacred in daily culture as well as in pristine nature. Grace is the virtue of caring for what's sacred. Wisdom, finally, is needed to give design direction and coherence, and if wisdom is distant, general education is close.

I'll conclude with a remark on the prospects of politics and the pursuit of excellence. No one can control or direct culture. Profound historical change is the great unforethinkable and unsurpassable contingency. But that should not keep us from doing what we know is called for and what in our station of life, however limited, we are able to do. There is a widespread sense that we may be at the threshold of a national renewal. That can give us the confidence to do our part in helping it come to pass.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159b-1161b.

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