

Can Character and Community Survive in an Age of Globalization?

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As most educated eighth graders could tell you (though this group may be increasingly small), Thomas Jefferson writes in the Declaration of Independence that all men are endowed by their Creator with the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Any government that does not secure these three rights has failed in its primary responsibility and is susceptible to being justly overthrown according to Jefferson's logic. Using such a failure as justification, the Thirteen Colonies overthrew the British Crown and formed the United States of America. Commenting on the contemporary state of the United States in respect to the last of these rights, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observes: "Every citizen has been granted the desired freedom and material goods in such quantity and of such quality as to guarantee in theory the achievement of happiness, in the debased sense of the word which has come into being . . ." <sup>1</sup> With a quick glance around the spot in which I am writing this essay (a local public library), I see the truth of the Russian sage's statement. I see large houses each built on three quarter acre parcels of land sprawling into the distance. In the driveway of these homes sit multiple automobiles: Escalades, Suburbans and the occasional Prius. Within a few miles there is a Target, Costco, Sam's Club, Barnes and Noble, and every other major retail store under the sun. None of their parking lots are lacking occupants. What, then, can be amiss? Why did Solzhenitsyn raise this point before an audience of this nation's young elite and tenured intelligentsia at Harvard in 1978? The nation—while in the midst of an economic downturn both now and when Solzhenitsyn was writing—seems to have found prosperity as far as the term is commonly understood in American society. Theoretically, as he points out, America ought to be happy. Cars, computers, and

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<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Harvard Address." *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, ed. Edward Ericson Jr. and Daniel Mahoney (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), pg. 566.

shipping containers unite the world in a globalized economy, creating an unprecedented material prosperity in many corners of the world.

The reason may be that Solzhenitsyn does not view this global economics as a model to emulate. Rejecting both communism and capitalism, he laments: “After the suffering of decades of violence and oppression, the human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today’s mass living habits, introduced as by a calling card by the revolting invasion of commercial advertising, by TV stupor, and by intolerable music.”<sup>2</sup> Apparently, after his time in the Gulag, Solzhenitsyn does not rest satisfied with *Sponge Bob Square Pants* and *Hannah Montana*. In his Harvard Speech, he does not spell out an explicit alternative, but points again and again to the cultural, moral, and spiritual vacuity of contemporary Western society. He laments that there is nothing higher in the West than acquiring and consuming. Without any coherent conception of the good, the West wallows in the nihilism of consumerism. To discover the roots of these malaises and perhaps discover an alternative, I think it will be helpful to turn again to the Declaration of Independence and its intellectual influences.

As mentioned above, the Declaration states that governments are formed to protect the rights of individuals. If these rights are violated, the citizens of the country have a right and duty to rebel and institute a new government. When Jefferson was writing in 1776, this idea was relatively new. This understanding of government originally developed in the writings of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the seventeenth century. Their rights based approach to government differs markedly from the political tradition that precedes it. In the classical tradition, with Aristotle as its chief

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 570.

spokesman, the state, or polis, has a much more ambitious goal. The state does not simply protect individuals; it “exists for the sake of the good life.”<sup>3</sup> Such a conception of the state or political life requires both a conception of the good life and that this conception be knowable through human reason. Such an end or *telos* for human existence is precisely what Hobbes, Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers denied. In his critique of the Enlightenment moral project, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that once these thinkers abandoned a teleological conception of human behavior the “project of finding a basis for morality had to fail.”<sup>4</sup> Without an end towards which to strive, the individual and community can find no intelligibility in their actions. MacIntyre argues that the various strategies of Enlightenment thinkers to provide a rational basis for morality apart from such an end must resort to “moral fictions” of various sorts. These “moral fictions” claim to be “objective and impersonal criterion” for action, but are actually no such thing.<sup>5</sup> Such criteria—utility, the categorical imperative, managerial expertise, or individual rights—start from incommensurable first principles that cannot be reconciled with one another. Nietzsche, consequently, is able to assert in *Beyond Good and Evil* that the moral enterprise must be abandoned. All that matters in human action is the assertion of the will. Any scheme of morality that pretends otherwise merely hides the will’s ambitions. Referencing Solzhenitsyn’s criticisms of the West, MacIntyre argues that the resultant political projects “oscillate between a freedom which is nothing but a lack of regulation of individual behavior and forms of collectivist control designed only to limit the anarchy self-interest.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1252b.

<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), pg. 54.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Jefferson, child of the Enlightenment that he was, may have hoped that, following rational self-interest, Western society could maintain a moral cohesiveness. Instead, his ostensibly noble desire to protect the individual's pursuit of happiness has resulted in the canonization of what Charles Taylor calls self-determining freedom.<sup>7</sup> The individual, free from all constraints, determines his own happiness and morality. This manifests itself in the modern processes of globalization; all constraints and barriers to whatever self-realization the individual consumer seeks must be torn down. The result is a world without boundaries or limits. The consumer can have whatever he can pay market price for. Corporations can do whatever is necessary to secure the lowest possible price for whatever the consumer wants. Consequently, we can see that the failure of the Enlightenment project has produced the moral and spiritual vacuum that Solzhenitsyn condemns.

What then is to be done? Is there any hope for the cultivation of community in today's community without borders? Understood on such a boundless scale, I think the answer is no. At the end of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre contends: "What matters most at this time is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us."<sup>8</sup> MacIntyre advances the abandonment of the current form of politics and a return to the local and Aristotelian form of community that predates the Enlightenment. Is this impossible? I do not think so. Brewing in society today are many calls from certain sections of both the left and right for a more local orientation in the economy and politics. Wendell Berry may be the best-known and influential advocate of such a turn.

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pg. 27.

<sup>8</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pg. 263.

As stated above, fully developed human community exists for the sake of the good life, sometimes translated as human flourishing. In Aristotelian parlance, the community exists to facilitate the full actualization of human potential. The actualization of this potential requires the virtues. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes virtue in the following terms:

Virtue, then, is a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason—the reason, that is, by which the practically wise person would determine it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess, the other of deficiency. It is a mean in that some vices fall short of what is right in feelings and actions, and others exceed it, while virtue both attains and chooses the mean.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike most modern moral frameworks (particularly the Kantian), the Aristotelian concept of virtue does not conceive of right and wrong in terms of rules. Rather, the practically wise man is able to discern in any given situation the middle ground that enables him to attain his end. With the virtue of courage for instance, the courageous man is neither rash nor timid. He knows when to charge the field such that he is neither putting himself at undue risk nor hiding when danger presents itself.

Acting in accordance with the mean in any given situation requires knowledge and experience, or practical wisdom. Furthermore, it requires interaction and cooperation with other members of the community. This requires that members of the community earnestly desire the good of the other members, what Aristotle understands as friendship.<sup>10</sup> In order to achieve this friendship among its members, the community must be limited in its size. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss points out that a community “meant to make man’s perfection possible must be kept together by mutual trust, and

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2000) 1107a.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1156a.

trust presupposes acquaintance.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike modern totalitarianism, which attempts to force a certain conception of the good of man on all people, Aristotle’s thought acknowledges limits. One can only know what is good or beneficial for another if friendship exists between the two of them. In the words of Aristotle, “it is difficult, if not indeed impossible, for a very populous city to enjoy good government.”<sup>12</sup> For Aristotle, the good citizen is the man who can rule and be ruled in turn. In order to lead others through virtue towards the good, he must have some knowledge of the lives of his fellow citizens. He gains this knowledge through friendship. Within the bounds of a contained community, one can discover the mean between excess and deficiency. Through trust and friendship, a community can strive for the highest goods. Without boundaries, such knowledge would be impossible to obtain.

In today’s world, governments rarely acknowledge such limits. The totalitarian horrors of Nazism and communism demonstrate the need for limits. Inspired by the promise of the sciences, these ideological movements attempted to control and shape the lives of millions. Even in contemporary democracies the tendency towards this tyranny is present. In the United States today, the federal government increasingly dominates every aspect of life, from education to the production of a single cabbage. Similarly, the increasingly large corporations of the globalized economy span continents and see little difference between the workers of Mexico and Malaysia. This, of course, is at great odds with Aristotle’s thought. Virtuous action and true community require limits.

At this point, however, many people would raise obvious difficulties. Compared to classical Greece, the modern United States possesses an enormous population. New

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<sup>11</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) pg. 130.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1326a.

York City alone has a population of more than eight million people. How then can these cities form communities in the Aristotelian understanding? In the *Politics*, Aristotle conceives of what he calls an alliance. Alliances are formed between cities to ensure defense and trade. The Preamble of the Constitution sounds very much like the charter for an Aristotelian alliance. This modern nation largely has no more ambition than self-defense and economic prosperity. It does not seek to promote the good, but rather establish order and promote trade. This, in and of itself, is not an unworthy goal. The state at every level of government, however, has eschewed promoting any kind of good, leaving the pursuit of happiness to the individual. As illustrated above, Aristotle does not believe that it is possible for the individual to flourish on his own. A community is required.

A useful correlative to this idea of an alliance is found in Catholic social teaching.

In *Quadragesimo anno*, Pope Pius XI articulates the principle of subsidiarity thusly:

[A] community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society always with a view to the common good.<sup>13</sup>

Bearing this principle in mind, it would not be impossible to expand the scope of Aristotle's notion of an alliance. On top of the necessarily local character of true communities, levels of society more broad but also more limited in scope can build. In recent times, the constitution of the European Union has explicitly embraced the concept of subsidiarity (and so has the Lisbon Treaty). In actual application, however, the European Union does not seem to follow this principle particularly well, overriding local

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<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), #1883.

religious and cultural practices in places like Poland and Romania. The EU, despite its apparent espousal of subsidiarity, seems to increasingly use a top down model of governance.

MacIntyre, however, advocates the opposite approach. In *After Virtue*, he is not very hopeful about society's chances of re-establishing flourishing communities. He thinks any institution or theory that has its origins in the Enlightenment is necessarily suspect due to its inherently flawed nature. Consequently, he places no trust in modern governments. With partisans and politicians coming from varied and interminable first principles, he believes society "cannot hope to achieve moral consensus."<sup>14</sup> Thus, MacIntyre's Aristotelian communities must be built from the ground up. Based on local knowledge and friendship, these communities can work to promote virtue and encourage the fullest development of human potential. Rather than aiming merely at the preservation of individual rights, these communities aim instead at the highest good, human flourishing.

By once again organizing society on a local, perhaps more human scale, Western society may hope to save itself from the moral vacuum that Solzhenitsyn sees in contemporary society. Thinkers like Wendell Berry are actively encouraging a return to local agriculture. Increasingly, city planners are looking to move away from the model of urban development in place over the last fifty. Rather than building sprawling suburbs in which the automobile is necessary, many more recent urban renewal projects are seeking to build small-scaled communities in which grocery stores, schools, and other businesses are within walking distance of residential areas. Rather than flying by neighbors in air-

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<sup>14</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue* pg. 252.

conditioned vehicles, these new communities encourage local interaction through walkable communities. Interestingly, both local agriculture and what has been termed “new urbanism” are embraced by elements of both the left and right. Apparently, both liberals and conservatives see the need to return to a more traditional model of community development. Suburbia has failed to live up to its post-war promise. With a return to local towns and communities as the fundamental unit of politics, perhaps there is a hope for rescuing character and community from the destructive powers of globalization.

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