

COMMENT ON EALY

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Steve Ealy invites us to reject what he calls “the prejudice of political philosophy.” He states his purpose clearly: “The burden of this paper is to deal with the twin prejudices of political philosophy—that political institutions should be the most authoritative and that the political system has the...responsibility for shaping the moral life of its citizens—and to show that these positions do not fit well with the nature of modern society.” But Ealy’s “burden” is, in fact, more than the effort “to show that these positions do not fit well the nature of modern society.”

The controversial core of Ealy’s paper is his claim that these twin positions are (1) actually prejudicial to the very philanthropic enterprise per se and (2) that the Progressives’ project and that of political philosophy are much closer than we have heretofore appreciated. Put differently, Ealy’s claim is that the alternative to the Progressive, statist agenda is not to be found in political philosophy, because political philosophy is the problem rather than the solution.

I agree with Ealy’s proposal: we need a critique of what political philosophy has to offer concerning the necessary and sufficient conditions for the pursuit of liberty, responsibility, and happiness in the contemporary world. First, we need to realize that we are actually living in the modern world and not some ancient fantasyland, nor, I would add, in some futuristic utopia. We need a modern solution for the problems of modernity, rather than a premodern, or again I would add, a postmodern alternative. Second, we both agree that political philosophy, to the extent that it does indeed approach coherence and relevance, is generally antagonistic toward the modern project, especially the claim that limited, decentralized government and an independent private sphere are more conducive to human liberty, communal responsibility, and personal happiness.

Ealy’s central figure is Leo Strauss, a German émigré who has had an enormous impact on both political philosophy and contemporary American conservatism. Ealy is particularly concerned about the Straussian “prejudice” that gives a privileged position to the Aristotelian concept that “the political solution to social problems appears to be the default position in contemporary

America,” and that perhaps America—these are my words, not Ealy’s—is ill-founded because no provision was made at the creation of the Constitution for the cultivation of public virtue. Ealy’s case against political philosophy is this: (1) Political philosophy is essentially Straussian political philosophy, and it is grounded in the ancient world and puts the *polis* first, and (2) the influential conservative commentator George Will, in arguing that statecraft is soulcraft, relies on the Straussian and the ancients’ claim that the political association is authoritative.

Why are these twin positions prejudicial in the modern world? Because, says Ealy, “we still live in the shadow of the *polis* intellectually...[T]he Greek *polis* is taken by many today to be the model of the healthy and well-functioning society.” Will’s “five functions of the political system” provide a paean to politics. Will’s government will concern itself with the “inner life of man,” Moreover, says Ealy’s Will, “the aim of politics...is a warm citizenship, approximating friendship, based on a sense of shared values and a shared fate.” The secondary institutions are precisely that, and they are useful only if and when government should decide to delegate chores from time to time. In other words, neither Strauss nor Will sees a place “in their society for an independent and vital philanthropic enterprise,” because they see the paramount importance of the *polis* and believe that the task of the *polis* is the moral education of the citizenry.

But here comes the really controversial part: isn’t such a twin prejudice, challenges Ealy, identical to putting “the amelioration of man’s spiritual, moral, emotional, and metaphysical distress,” in the direct hands of the state? Isn’t there an important connection between Will’s “breathtaking” appeal to the centrality of the political association and the Progressive William James’s 1910 appeal to the “martial virtues” that would “inflame the civic temper” in a moral equivalent of war against whatever terrible social ills had infected America? Ealy thus portrays the Progressive left as being in the same family tree of political philosophy as the Straussian branch of the contemporary Conservative right. Ealy’s point is this: there is an important “underlying connection between modern American liberalism and American conservatism (at least the ‘conservatism’ represented by Will.” And they both are connected to the foundational claims of political philosophy, the prejudice of which is articulated by Leo Strauss.

Now this claim by Ealy challenges the well-known antagonism of the

Straussians toward the Progressives. Let me express a certain initial skepticism concerning this challenge. The Progressives aren't interested in the idea of statesmanship because they are not essentially moved by "doing the best with what one has," a hallmark of Aristotelian politics. Nor are they particularly interested in promoting citizenship; for the Progressives, politics is far too complicated to be left to the ordinary citizen working through the rough and tumble of the deliberative process. Politics, in fact, is dirty rather than enriching, as far as the Progressives are concerned, and what they advocate is the replacement of partisan politics with the science of administration, under the guidance of experts, rather than with the art of the statesman. One last note of caution about drawing too close a connection between political philosophy and Progressivism: the ancients genuinely endorsed generosity to others as a personal virtue; the Progressives view philanthropy as a public obligation.

Ealy concludes with a discussion of Michael Polanyi and Michael Oakeshott—and by implication Hayek—all of whom he contrasts with Strauss, Will, and James. According to Ealy, the former challenge the idea that the political association is the most comprehensive and authoritative association and thus provide a view "more compatible with the development of an independent philanthropy." Polanyi rejects the metaphor of the scientific enterprise as men building a house from blueprints. Life, instead, he claims, is "polycentric." Oakeshott argues that rather than being a central activity, politics "is a highly specialized and abstracted form of communal activity." He suggests that "the political system has a limited importance." Accordingly, Oakeshott moves the "creative center" outside of government and posits, instead, the existence of multiple creative centers within society. And, quite correctly, Ealy sees this shift as "a necessary condition for a renewed philanthropy, but in itself it is not a sufficient condition for such renewal." And thus ends this challenging essay.

Ealy concentrates on the critique of modernity from the right, or premodern perspective, and virtually ignores the left, members of which I think are just as prejudiced against the modern project. There is, for example, a widespread left-inspired criticism of classical political philosophy in general, and of Strauss in particular, within the very field of political philosophy itself. Put differently, Strauss and political philosophy are not synonymous. There is, in fact, within contemporary political philosophy a fundamental antagonism toward both Strauss and limited government and the private sector, which exceeds anything that can be attributed to Strauss and his followers.

To be sure, both Strauss and his critics emphasize the vices of modernity, and they both express an embarrassment—a critical component of prejudice—with respect to the modern project. From Hegel to Heidegger, by way of Marx and Nietzsche, the emphasis is on what is wrong—banal, unheroic, mediocre, and self-indulgent—with modernity and why we need a non-modern solution to the problems of modernity. There is indeed something that political philosophers, both left and right, abhor about what Ealy correctly identifies as the hallmarks of modernity: the economic market system and limited political government. Political philosophy, for the most part, impeaches modernity, but I would suggest that ancient, premodern political philosophy is perhaps more compatible with modernity than is the postmodern alternative, if for no other reason than that the ancients recognized the existence of metaphysical foundations. Postmodernists suggest that only power matters, and thus that personal philanthropy is simply another form of the exercise of individual power.

Let me put Ealy's thesis in my own terms: We know that modernity has its faults, but we need to do the best we can with what we have. And modernity is what we have, and philanthropy is what we can do to improve the human condition consistent with an adherence to limited government and free markets. But how do we know this will work out? Ealy emphasizes the necessity of the doctrine of spontaneous order, and I suggest the sufficiency of the concept of self-interest rightly understood. Ealy is surely correct to say that Polanyi, Oakeshott, and Hayek identify the necessary condition for a robust private philanthropy; I would add that Tocqueville points out the sufficient condition.

We need to build on Ealy's call that we, in effect, shift from *public policy* to *private action*. But we need then to move forward and make the case for *public action* on the foundation of *private action*. I don't think that Polanyi, Oakeshott, and Hayek have a definitive answer to the important question here: How do you know that spontaneous action produces better and more orderly outcomes? Why is this not, ultimately, also a "prejudice?" Are we not, if we don't take the next step, replacing "the prejudice of political philosophy"—seeing the state or *polis* as the most authoritative actor in our social life—with "the prejudice of the market," the notion that the market ought to be the authoritative source for the distribution of values?

Is conscious *public action* possible, or are we left with the alternatives of *public policy*, endorsed by political philosophy, or *private action*, endorsed by the spontaneous market? Why be privately philanthropic under either the authorita-

tive or the spontaneous model? If the political philosophy model treats economics as subservient to politics, the market model suggests just the reverse. If political philosophers err in identifying spontaneity with anarchy, then market supporters err in identifying statesmanship with coercion. Is there, possibly, a third way?

I think we need a Tocquevillian, modern *public action* solution for the problems of modernity, one that retains spontaneous human initiative and yet appeals to the civic dimension of human existence. One that overcomes the ancient appeal to communal duty without relying exclusively on the invisible hand of the marketplace. As I read Tocqueville, he warns that reliance on ancient sacrifice is inappropriate. But he also warns that the market system may well encourage self-interest wrongly understood: the notion that I help others by helping myself. Tocqueville is arguing for self-interest rightly understood: By helping others, I help myself. In short, that is the case for being privately philanthropic in the modern world.

As Tocqueville said, self-interest rightly understood is not “a sublime doctrine,” one that is among the highest of individual virtues. But it is reliable; it brings out the best in modern man; it produces “orderly, temperate, moderate, careful, and self-controlled citizens.” Most importantly, it provides an alternative to both the paternalistic state and the market state. It does not encourage an attachment to the prejudice of political philosophy, nor does it encourage us to abandon the fact that we are, by nature, at least partly political animals. The doctrine that “virtue is useful” leads humans “to help one another and disposes them freely to part of their time and wealth for the good of the state.” And when we support this practical approach with the dissemination of the “sublime utterance” of Christianity—“we must do good to our fellows for love of God”—we have, in effect, provided the second dimension of the sufficient condition for personal philanthropy that is absent in both the classical model and the market alternative.