Since the following article, "The Lower Is Not the More Solid" takes as its point of departure a famous remark by the political thinker Leo Strauss, some readers, agitated by the controversies and factional conflicts which swirl around this provocative figure, may wonder whether I am what political theorists call a Straussian. For those who insist on knowing, this is not the case. I differ with Straussians not only in many of their conclusions, but also in their approach to the interpretation of texts, which I think tends to violate its own stated principles.

Some will take this declaration as proof that I am a Straussian after all, since Straussians tend to read many texts as concealing their true meanings, and sometimes write that way themselves. But the search for esoteric meanings can be overdone. Once, at a conference, I presented two talks. The gentleman assigned to comment on the talks, himself a Straussian, and an erudite man whom I like very much, drew the entirely mistaken conclusion that since I had made nine claims in the talk on liberalism, but only eight in the talk on conservatism, I must have been hinting that the most important claim in the latter talk was hidden between the lines of claims four and five. Why would I hide it? Because, he reasoned, it must not be stated openly. He then proceeded to tell us all what he took it to be.

But since the article is not about Strauss, let us bring this digression to an end. "The Lower Is Not the More Solid" appeared in the English edition of the international Catholic theological journal *Communio*, which was founded by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, and Joseph Ratzinger (later known as Pope Benedict XVI), and is now published in fourteen languages. To find out more about the journal, click [here]. To read the article, go to the next page

THE LOWER IS NOT
THE MORE SOLID

• J. Budziszewski •

"A society may also become more virtuous
in one dimension while decaying in another.
Not only do civilizations die a smoldering death,
but they rise again from the embers."

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Leo Strauss considered it a principle of modern social order that the lower foundation is stronger than the higher one.[1] Actually the principle has been around for much longer than that. Be that as it may, this is a good time to find out whether it is true, for our foundation is very low indeed.

I trust no one will be surprised by this statement. There is no need to belabor the statistics on spousal betrayal, parental abandonment, pederastic seduction by ministers of religion, or the willingness of ordinary people to lie and cheat; we have read them. It would be fatuous to relate copious anecdotes of private vice; we have heard them. As should have been expected, our public life is no more edifying than our private. The first steps have been taken toward criminalizing policy disagreements. The use of private

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[1]"By building civil society on the 'low but solid ground' of selfishness or of certain 'private vices,' one will achieve much greater 'public benefits' than by futilely appealing to virtue, which is by nature 'unendowed'" (Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953], 247).

detectives to dig up dirt on opponents no longer surprises us. Defamatory lying is so much the norm that the sharp term "character assassination" has lost its sting, and one can only wonder how much time will pass before its place is taken by real assassination. The idea that law might *not* be "whatever judges say" is no longer even considered intelligible enough to be ridiculous. Although a few political science majors may have heard the expression "rule of law," scarcely one in fifty has a clear idea what it means.

The conventional response to such dark murmurings is that all times think that old times were better. No, some old times were much worse, and perhaps all old times were worse in some ways. Even so, we could give those times a run for their money. Part of our difficulty in seeing ourselves clearly is that we have lost the sense of what good times might be. How could the times be so bad when our vices are so gentle, so nice? We do not herd children off to gas chambers or expose them (very often) on street corners; we only authorize their mothers to kill them in neighborhood clinics. We do not force slaves to disembowel each other in gladiatorial contests; we only buy our young electronic games so that they can participate in the lust of bloodshed without actually committing it. We do not have a caste system; we only have hospital ethics boards to decide which lives are not worthy of life.

Another conventional response to such dark murmurings is what Eliot's dead-on expression calls "dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good."[2] We cheerfully call out the social engineers and assign them the task of making virtue superfluous. The first part of this response is to say that what matters is not character, but conduct; it does not matter how sordid you are inwardly, so long as you behave. We may retain the word "virtue," but we reinterpret it to mean mere compliance with the rules.

The second part of the response is to change the rules themselves. In some domains, especially business and financial dealings, the rules are made more stringent and complicated, on the assumption that it is easier to get people to comply if they are closely monitored and know exactly what is expected of them. Oddly, in other domains, especially marriage, family, and sexuality, the rules are relaxed or eliminated, on the assumption that it is easier to get people to comply if there is not much to comply with anyway.

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[2]T. S. Eliot, "Choruses From the Rock" (1934).

The third part of the response is to compensate for the inevitable social consequences of the new regime. Do businessmen break the rules? Then we still make more rules and step up the monitoring. Do people have children out of wedlock? Do not expect chastity; give them birth control pills. Do pills alter behavior so that even more children are born out of wedlock than before? Do not reconsider the previous decision; allow them to kill some of them. Are fathers abandoning the ones who survive? Do not compel them to live up to their responsibilities; put the mothers on the dole. Considering what kinds of fathers and husbands such men make, mothers may even prefer such arrangements; after all, once you have infantilized men, matriarchy looks pretty good. Unfortunately, under such a regime the mothers too are infantilized, so matriarchy does not work either. I am merely illustrating. The general principle is that the effort to compensate for the consequences of a regime in which virtue is not expected inevitably begets consequences of its own. Eventually the regime collapses under the weight of its own supposed perfections.

Instead of dismissing the dark murmurings, then, let us consider what might be needed to become, not compliant, but actually good. Let us set aside these foolish thoughts of making virtue superfluous, and ask: What might it take for an adult population, and their rulers, to become virtuous—or at least to become more nearly virtuous than they are? And since even pagan nations may approach more or less nearly to virtue, for now let us confine our attention to the resources available to fallen nature apart from supernatural grace; how the picture *changes* with the introduction of grace may be left for another time.

Unquestionably, this is a difficult and subtle problem. If I may make a suggestion, though, the reason it defeats us may have less to do with its subtleties than with the fact that we tend to overlook some of its most obvious features. The result is that when we do come to the subtleties, we do not ask the right questions. Perhaps, then, we ought to be not less obvious but more.

Conception One

According to a certain naïve but commonplace conception, adult moral development is very much like childhood moral

development. How so? In the first place, this view makes no distinction between passing from an *unformed* condition to virtue, and passing from a *vicious* condition to virtue. To put it another way, the privation of good order in the adult soul is seen, not as the possession of a perverse order, opposed to right order, but simply as the absence of order. In the second place, this view takes development in virtue to be simple and continuous. Little by little, we simply acquire the moral order that we lack. One might say that on this view, the topography of moral character is flat. There is no greater tendency for the soul to be in one place than in another. We move from one condition to the next—like sliding a package across the floor—and the only sources of resistance are friction and inertia.

Conception Two

Unfortunately, the sliding package is not even a faithful image of the moral development of children, much less adults. Its most obvious weakness is that development in virtue is *not* simple and continuous. Moral development takes effort—*more* effort, somehow, than overcoming friction and inertia—and it passes through stages. Not only do new habits have to be formed, but old ones need to be broken up. The process is less like sliding a package along the floor, than like climbing a staircase, where besides having to overcome friction and inertia, one must also overcome gravity.

Though more faithful to experience in these ways, the staircase image is unsatisfactory in other ways. It gives the impression that whatever level of moral development we have reached, we can *rest* there. The first problem is that at least most of the time, it seems that in order to be retained, virtue has to be exercised; moral discipline is necessary even to keep from slipping further down. The motto "use it or lose it" seems to apply even more strongly to the development of virtue than to muscle-building, or even to interdepartmental competition for agency budgets. In the second place, even if there are certain resting places on the upward climb, these resting places could not be just anywhere, otherwise we would be back to the level surface of the sliding package image. Besides, what makes resting places possible? A resting place would be something in the nature of an equilibrium. In a dynamical system, however, equilibrium does not just *happen*. What could bring it about? Could

it be brought about by a balance of opposing forces, the lure of the appetites on one hand, the longing for virtue on the other? That seems precarious and implausible.

Conception Three

But perhaps equilibrium could be brought about by mutually reinforcing elements, where P foments Q, and in turn Q foments P, going round and round in a causal circle. Such equilibria of mutually reinforcing elements are so familiar that we even have names for them, like the name "vicious circles." It is curious that we do not often speak of "virtuous circles"; when we do, the term strikes us as a punning play on the former expression. Perhaps the reason is that the vicious kind of circle is more common, or perhaps it is that, being so terrible, the vicious circle etches itself more painfully on our awareness.

However, both vicious and virtuous circles are commonplace, not only in moral life but in the literature of moral life. One type was fundamental not only to Aristotle's educational theory but also to his political theory. If the young man is well-formed by his parents, teachers, and the laws, in that order, then in adulthood, he himself is able to function well as a father, teacher, and legislator, and the circle begins again. Each element of the circle is indispensable. If the young are ill-formed by their parents, then they are ill-fit to be taught—the reason for Aristotle's famous refusal to accept students who had not been brought up well. If the citizens are ill-formed by the laws, then they are not fit to legislate—the reason for the insistence of Aristotle and his followers that the purpose of law is to make men good.

It might be thought that I am cheating: Instead of describing the mutual dependence of each element in the moral life on each of the others, I have been describing the moving process by which each generation is formed by and dependent upon the one before it. At first the process appears to be circular because the old form the young, who become the old, who then form the young, who then become the old, and so on. But it is really more like a spiral, because at each turn of the axle we have a different young and a different old. We may concede this point.

Of course true circles are also commonplace. Consider the complementarity of the sexes. The male and female sorts of humanity need each other; there is a kind of incompleteness at the heart of each one, which only the other can supply. Short of the charism of celibacy, this requires a conjugal community in which the spouses support each other in their shared moral life. This would be a virtuous circle. But now consider the sort of person who denies all this—perhaps a young woman who is interested in men, but who is convinced that the interests of men and women are at war. Men, in her view, are by nature predatory, never to be trusted. What women want is not to form a conjugal community but just to get married, and as lures, they dole out their favors. What men want, however, is to enjoy the favors of women without getting married, or, if drawn by some mishap into marriage, to give back as little as possible. Now such views are false. They do violence to our natures, and they are unjust, even today, to a good many women and a good many men. Unfortunately, such views also help to bring about the very state of affairs that they deplore. You cannot tell predators from non-predators if you think that all men are predators. You cannot live in a virtuous circle in which each successful marriage is an encouragement to all others if the specter of true community of the spouses so fills you with resentment that you want to prove it false and tear it down. If you organize your life on the basis of the conviction that all relations between the sexes are predatory, you will end up in predatory relationships which seem to confirm your belief. You will indeed live in a circle, but the circle that you live in will be vicious.

How is it ever possible to break out of a vicious circle? Can the sheer unhappiness of it provide a motive to resist? Not without better understanding, and not without hope. By itself, unhappiness does nothing to develop understanding, and insofar as it encourages despair, it may lead still deeper into the circle. One day in class the topic of the sexual revolution came up. I confined myself to remarking to the students that although my generation had invented the upheaval, I had the impression that their generation was paying for it. A young man remarked that he knew what I meant. My heart went out to him when he said that more than anything, he longed to fall in love with a woman, marry her, and be faithful to her forever. But I was cast down again when he added, "But I don't think it's possible." His own parents had not been able to manage

lifelong fidelity. Unwilling to hope that he could do better than they did, he was afraid to get married at all.

A certain kind of misery can even generate a vicious circle. I am thinking especially of the misery—often, the suppressed misery—of guilty knowledge. If I repent of the evil I have done, say, complicity in abortion, then I can confess my wrong, make the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart, attempt to restore the bonds that I have broken, and get back into harmony with justice. But if I refuse to repent, these needs of my soul do not vanish; I merely pay them in counterfeit coin. I confess every detail of what I did except that it was wrong; I pay every pain and price except the one price demanded; I simulate the restoration of broken intimacy by enjoying the substitute intimacy of sharing in guilt with equally guilty companions; and instead of being made just, I invent justifications. Any one of these movements is sufficient to start up the circle, and all of them are going on at once. Acquiring a life of their own, they may even drive me into new misdeeds that it was no part of my original intention to commit.[3]

Conception Four

In our quick run through just one hall of the gallery of vicious and virtuous circles, we have glanced at the spiraling wheels of children and parents, students and teachers, citizens and the laws, and considered the spinning tops of conjugal love, war of the sexes, and war against the conscience. Especially with the last of these, we have already encroached on the sovereign territory of another, different type of vicious or virtuous circle: The interior circle, the *orbis cordis,* in which the mutually reinforcing elements are principles in the heart of the soul itself. The most concise and systematic theorist of the interior circle is St. Thomas Aquinas, on whom we must spend some time.

St. Thomas observes that among the things that mutually support each other in the moral life are the virtues themselves. I am

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[3]I discuss these processes in several other works, especially "The Revenge of Conscience," *First Things* 84 (1998): 21–27, and *The Line Through the Heart: Natural Law as Fact, Theory, and Sign of Contradiction* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2009).

presenting only one of his arguments, which he borrows from Aristotle, but as usual puts more clearly.[4] The first step is to show that each of the moral virtues depends on prudence. According to St. Thomas, although the moral virtues direct us to right ends, by themselves they do not show us the right way to pursue these ends. Courage, for example, requires enough fear to avoid being rash, and enough daring to avoid being cowardly. But how much to give fear and daring their way varies from case to case. Correct choice requires deliberating well, attaining the right judgment, and applying this judgment to action. These elements are supplied by prudence.

To start with, then, imagine then a star-shaped diagram, with prudence at the center; rays to show causal relationships darting out in all directions, at the end of each ray one of the moral virtues. Aristotle includes only natural moral virtues such as courage, friendliness, liberality, justice, and temperance, which plainly must be reckoned with too. But even if we omit spiritual or infused virtues, such as charity, from the diagram, there is no particular reason why we must restrict ourselves to Aristotle's own list of natural virtues. For example, we might add *religio,* the natural virtue which moves even pagans to pay homage to God. Then again, insofar as *religio* is a department of justice, the natural virtue which moves us to give each what is due to him, perhaps we have already covered it.[5]

The next step is to show that the dependency works in the other direction too—that the causal arrows dart both outward, from prudence to each moral virtue, and inward, from each moral virtue to prudence. According to St. Thomas, just as the moral virtues depend on prudence for knowledge of right means, so prudence depends on the moral virtues for direction to right ends. Were it not for the virtue of temperance, prudence would be jerked around by a riot of conflicting impulses and desires, trying to satisfy or at least conciliate them all. This is what Aristotle has in mind when he says

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[4]Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 65, a. 1, citing Aristotle, *Ethics,* 6.13. His other argument, which turns on the fact that all of the virtues depend on certain general properties, is taken from Gregory the Great, *Magna Moralia,* 22.1, and Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 6.4.

[5]See Thomas Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 81, esp. aa. 1, 2, and 5, ad 3. In this context we should note his citation of such pagan authorities as Cicero, *Rhetoric*, 2.53.

that temperance "preserves" prudence.[6] But if St. Thomas is right, then why should we not say the same things about each of the moral virtues? In their own ways, they preserve prudence too. Consider courage, the virtue that deals with fear and daring. The prudent man has to fear error. Yet he also has to risk it in pursuit of right judgment, and he must dare the contempt of others if they think him a fool. So courage too preserves prudence. The upshot of all this is that our star-shaped figure must be modified so that the causal arrows point in both directions: Not only outward from prudence to each moral virtue, but also inward from each moral virtue to prudence.

But this change requires another one. Why? Because if the dependency between prudence and the moral virtues is really mutual—if it works in both directions, not just one—then a strong conclusion follows. Consider any two moral virtues. Just to be definite, let us choose temperance and courage. Dependency is transitive, so if courage depends on prudence, and prudence depends on temperance, then courage depends on temperance. For the same reason, if temperance depends on prudence, and prudence depends on courage, then temperance depends on courage. So the mutual dependency we have already observed between moral virtue and prudence *also* obtains between these two different moral virtues. Now exactly the thing is true of *every* pair of moral virtues. The conclusion is unmistakable: Every moral virtue depends on every one of the others. It may seem that this new result fails to follow, because just as "one may have the art of making certain things, without the art of making certain others," so "one may be prudent about things to be done in relation to one virtue, without being prudent in those that concern another virtue." St. Thomas replies to this objection by pointing out that the analogy between making and doing is flawed: Although things "made" are not necessarily related to each other, things "done" are always related to each other. Consequently, he says, "the lack of prudence in one department of things to be done, would result in a deficiency affecting other things to be done: whereas this does not occur in things to be made."[7]

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[6]*Ethics* 6.5 (1149b).

[7]Ibid., ad 4.

Now our original star-shaped figure will look more like a spider-web or a bicycle wheel. From each node—whether prudence, or one of the moral virtues—bidirectional threads or spokes point to each of the other nodes. This interconnection of virtues has staggering consequences. Perhaps you know what happens when a bicycle wheel is bent. Since all the spokes are connected through the hub and the rim, if one is misaligned, then each of the others is also pulled out of true. The only way to straighten one spoke is to straighten all of them. Now moral virtues are to the spokes of this wheel as prudence is to the hub. Thus what happens to one is transmitted to each of the others. All virtues are joined, each one is part of the web. A touch on any thread makes the whole web shake.

On reflection, we find that this describes real life quite well. To mention but one example, as we have recently been reminded in South Carolina, a statesman who cannot keep faith with his wife is scarcely likely to keep faith with his friends and constituents. Why should we ever have dreamt otherwise? In order to be deceived about the good of fidelity, a man must also be deceived about a whole range of other goods. The truest friendship is partnership in a good life; in that respect his friendliness is impaired. Justice requires acute perception of what is really due to the other person; in that sense his justice is impaired. Courage requires not mere fearlessness but a right estimate of what things are worth fighting for; in that sense his courage is impaired. Everything is addled, everything out of adjustment.

I do not wish the South Carolina example to be misunderstood. There are many good reasons not to pry into other people's marriages; I am only suggesting that the silly notion that all of the virtues are disconnected from each other is not one of them. We may also concede that just as one bicycle spoke may be less out of true than another, and just as a man's heart may work better than his lungs, so he may approach more nearly to true virtue in one dimension than in another. St. Thomas is realistic about this fact—by contrast, for instance, with Socrates, who thought that in the last analysis, wisdom is the only virtue there is. But even Socrates was not wholly wrong; he only exaggerated. If we are flawed in one way, then inevitably we are flawed, to some degree, in all ways.

Conception Five

St. Thomas restricts his argument about the connectedness of the virtues to what he calls perfect virtues. In the case of an imperfect virtue, I have an inclination to do the kind of deed in question, but I am not guided by prudence, so I may not do it at the right time or in the right way. By contrast, in the case of a perfect virtue, both sides of the mutual dependency do their part: Virtue directs us rightly to our ends and prudence directs us rightly to the means, so that we not only do the kind of deed in question, but do it well. As we have seen, perfect virtues are connected with each other by way of their shared connection with prudence. According to the Angelic Doctor, however, imperfect virtues are not connected at all, "since we find men who, by natural temperament or by being accustomed, are prompt in doing deeds of liberality, but are not prompt in doing deeds of chastity."

The upshot is that the picture St. Thomas presents, at any rate in this passage, is static. It describes the equilibrium of a man of perfect virtue, in whom each moral disposition supports each of the others. However, it has nothing to say about the dynamics of disequilibrium, of moral decay or development in those who are flawed. In fact, from the point of view that the Angelic Doctor has been developing, in relation to flawed people even the term "disequilibrium" would too strong. If morally imperfect dispositions are disconnected, then, they can have no dynamic relationships at all.

But is the static picture true? Doesn't an argument quite similar to St. Thomas' apply to imperfect people too? Granted that in a state of perfection, virtue supplies the ends and prudence supplies the means. Granted, too, that outside of perfection, the fullness of prudence is lacking. But that is not the end of the story. The flawed man probably lacks other things too, and possesses still other things that take their place. In the first place, flawed affective dispositions take the place of virtue by supplying distorted images of the ends. For example, even though I know that friendship is good, I may have a muddled notion of what friendship really is. In the second place, no one acts without any reflection or judgment whatsoever. Even a flawed man relies on some sort of understanding, which takes the place of prudence by supplying disordered

means. For example, I may think I can secure friends by bribing or threatening them.

It seems to follow that just as prudence and true moral virtues depend on each other in one way, flawed understanding and flawed affective dispositions depend on each other in another way. In fact, they probably depend on each other in *two* ways. Not only does each supply something to the other—images of the ends, and ideas of the means—but they *reinforce* each other. Our muddled notions of ends and means prop each other up.

But if all this is true, then the affective dispositions of flawed people are connected after all. Just as true moral virtues are connected with each other by means of prudence, so flawed affective dispositions are connected with each other by means of flawed understanding. We must now modify our diagram again. It will still look like a spider web or bicycle wheel; this time the change lies not in where we draw the causal arrows, but in how we label the nodes. Instead of labeling the central node "Prudence," we label it "Understanding"—recognizing that it may be a deeply flawed understanding. Instead of labeling the nodes on the rim moral virtues, we label them affective dispositions that imitate the virtues—recognizing that these imitations may be very poor.

Our new conception of things does not require believing that flawed people have to be equally flawed in every dimension. To reiterate St. Thomas' example, we should still expect "to find men who . . . are prompt in doing deeds of liberality, but are not prompt in doing deeds of chastity." Even so, what happens in any dimension has consequences for all the others, not only in a state of perfect virtue, but all the way down to vice. The picture is no longer static; it is dynamical.

Conception Six

But what *kinds* of consequences do the events in one dimension have for all the others? Even the static analysis that we started with showed that for one virtue to be perfect, all the other virtues would have to be perfect too. If we are flawed in one way, we are flawed, to some degree, in all ways. It might seem that the proper way to "dynamicize" this insight would be to say that at *any* stage of moral development, injury in any dimension of virtue is a

drag on the whole moral organism. Each flaw generates other flaws, which generate other flaws, which generate other flaws, and so on down the line. Therefore let us imagine a second diagram. We are not setting the first one aside; we are merely supplementing it. Imagine this time a mountain of moral conditions, steep and sharply pointed, with impossibly slick sides to which no one can cling. Anyone who is not precariously perched at the apex inevitably slides all the way to the base. To put it another way, there are only two moral equilibria: One is perfect virtue, the other is moral ruin.

As we see, only one of these two equilibria is stable, the one at the bottom. Equilibrium and stability are not the same thing. To change the metaphor, a marble in a bowl is in stable equilibrium. If I nudge it with my finger, it tends to settle back down to the bottom. By contrast, a house of cards is in unstable equilibrium. If I nudge it with my finger; it does not settle back into shape; it collapses. When I say then that the system has two equilibria but that only one is stable, I mean that in our new conception, vice is like the marble in the bowl, but virtue is like the house of cards. The moment you depart from virtue, you are on the way to vice. Perhaps adventitious forces could arrest your decline, but nothing inherent to the process could do so. You had better be wholly good, or you will probably end up wholly bad.

Is this view of things accurate? There is certainly something in the common sense of ordinary people that supports it. Although we do find virtue attractive, we also, somehow, resent it, and each one of us has experienced the gravitational force of sin. Commonly, we also recognize a point of no return, beyond which the bad get worse and worse. I hinted at this earlier, when I remarked that despair and bad conscience not only generate vicious circles but drive us "deeper into them"—deeper, that is, into vice. As the hero remarks in one of G. K. Chesterton's stories, "Men may keep a sort of level of good, but no man has ever been able to keep on one level of evil. That road goes down and down."[8] Well, the road that goes down and down is now plain enough.

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[8]Father Brown makes the remark in the story "The Flying Stars." See G. K. Chesterton, *The Penguin Complete Father Brown* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 63.

Conception Seven

The problem with the house of cards is that although it reflects the former part of Chesterton's statement, it fails to reflect the latter part. It shows why no man can "keep on one level of evil," but it fails to show how anyone can hold "a sort of level of good." It leads us to expect that although now and then one may come across a case of virtue, as now and then one may come across a house of cards, it will never last long. But this seems extreme. We do meet people of apparently stable good character. Though virtue may be rare, it is more than a will o' the wisp. It may not be durable as adamant, but surely it is more durable than sea foam.

To return to an earlier part of the discussion, perhaps we did not do justice to St. Thomas and Aristotle in calling their view static rather than dynamical. Consider again Aristotle's remark that temperance preserves prudence. He says that pleasures and pains *destroy and pervert* correct beliefs about what is to be done. He goes on to say that the man who has been ruined in this way fails to see even the "principles" of the virtues. In other words, he lacks an accurate perception not only of right means, but even of right ends. By steeling him against pleasures and pains, temperance keeps this from happening. St. Thomas says much the same thing, holding that temperance "withdraws man from things which seduce the appetite from obeying reason, while fortitude incites him to endure or withstand those things on account of which he forsakes the good of reason."[9] These certainly sound like dynamical claims. Moreover, they suggest that up to a point, the equilibrium of the virtuous man *does* have some tendency to maintain itself against disturbance, that virtue is not a house of cards after all.

We might not have to give up the idea of a point of no return, a point beyond which the imperfect man slides inexorably down. What we do need to give up is the idea that the point of no return is only infinitesimally distant from perfection. Perhaps, then, the dynamical landscape of virtue is more faithfully reflected not by a mountain pointed on top, but by a mountain with a shallow valley or cauldron on top. The approximately virtuous man enjoys a little

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[9]*ST* II–II, q. 141, a. 2. I am using the public-domain translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, available online at www.newadvent.org/summa.

well of stability; he has attained that state of character in which it is easier for him to act virtuously than not to do so. He is not clinging desperately to the slope, suffering all sorts of wrong desires and at best suppressing them. By and large, he even desires what he ought to desire. Not unless he passes over the lip of the cauldron is he caught on the catastrophic slide to ruin.

Conception Eight

I think the preceding image of things is still deficient. One reason is that the little well of stability, the local equilibrium which the approximately virtuous man enjoys at the top of the mountain, is not the only such well. In fact, there are others, surprising ones. The thinker who saw this most clearly was St. Augustine of Hippo. Reflecting on the history of Rome, Augustine explained how the love of glory, in reality a vice, could so closely imitate a virtue that the Romans thought it really was one.[10] The reason it could do this is that although I may have all sorts of corrupt desires, my love of glory may be stronger still. For the sake of being admired by others, I suppress all those other desires and perform seemingly public–spirited deeds in the public square. The underlying idea is that subvirtuous motives may be channeled and directed so that they give rise to some of the behavior that true virtue would produce. And so, wonder of wonders, somewhere down the slope, the slide to the bottom is arrested; the sides of the mountain are not quite sheer after all, but varied here and there by little hollows.

At first it seems that not only the love of glory but almost any subvirtuous motive might be used or exploited in this way. The process is so powerful and flexible that in Augustine's view, what grounds a given commonwealth is not that the citizens share a sense of justice, as Cicero's Scipio thought—for Augustine thinks no commonwealth is wholly just—but only that they agree about the objects of their love.[11] Each love tends to generate its own local equilibrium. Some of these local equilibria may be far down the

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[10]*The City of God,* 5.12–21. My remarks here are adapted from an earlier discussion in "Politics of Virtues, Government of Knaves," *First Things* 44 (1994): 38–44.

[11]*City of God*, 2.21.

slope indeed. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, disastrous attempts have been made to put even envy, fear, and hatred into harness for some conception of the good. Vice puts on the clothing of virtue in pettier and more personal ways as well. How often we see that the need to condescend, the craving to *feel* virtuous, or even the urge to atone, may ape true compassion for the weak and misused. But perhaps these masquerades are not so petty and personal after all. They account for a large part of the character of our present ruling class.

As we become accustomed to peering through the Augustinian eyepiece, we find more and more subvirtuous local equilibrium, some of them higher up the slope and some of them lower down. I will mention just a few. Augustine himself suggests that at an earlier stage of Rome's history, the shared love that united the citizens and kept their baser loves in check was the love of independence, of self-rule, of being their own masters. Though no more a virtue than the sheer love of glory, the love of independence imitates a virtue well enough to have fooled a number of our own Founders too. Alexander Hamilton, who thought this love strongest in the business classes, pinned his political hopes on the leadership of gentlemen. Thomas Jefferson, who thought it stronger in the farming classes, pinned his on the sons of the earth. Aristotle had a surprisingly high view of the possibilities, not of the shared love of independence, but of the shared love of security, for in a regime in which both the Few and the Many have some part in ruling, the love of security is exactly what motivates middle class citizens to preserve the balance of power, imitating virtue that they do not possess. Bernard Mandeville, Adam Smith, and Alexis de Toqueville famously argued that subvirtuous local equilibrium can be grounded in yet another shared love, the desire for material comfort and gain. James Madison argued that it can be grounded in shared love of eminence, in "pitting ambition against ambition."

On closer consideration, the number of important subvirtuous local equilibria is probably much smaller than the previous considerations suggest. In order to ground subvirtuous equilibrium, a motive would require two properties. It would have to be able to direct lesser vices, and it would have to be able to do so in a way that mimics virtue. Motives that are able to direct lesser vices have been a topic of reflection for many centuries. They are precisely the ones that Western tradition calls "capital" or "cardinal" vices, for as

Thomas Aquinas succinctly explains, "a capital vice is one from which other vices arise, chiefly by being their final cause . . . . Wherefore a capital vice is not only the principle of others, but is also their director and, in a way, their leader: because the art or habit, to which the end belongs, is always the principle and the commander in matters concerning the means."[12] According to the tradition, the number of capital vices is no more than seven: Glory in Augustine's sense,[13] along with envy, anger, sloth, covetousness, gluttony, and lust. If the tradition is right about this point, then the number of important subvirtuous local equilibria is probably no more than seven either. It may be even smaller, because the fact that a motive can direct lesser vices is no guarantee that it can do so in a way that mimics virtue.

The achievement of subvirtuous local equilibrium also has both institutional and moral requirements. First let us consider *its institutional* requirements. The setting for Augustine's discussion of the love of glory imitating virtue has two institutional features. In the first place the society has fixed statuses, because only a nobility is sufficiently interested in glory; in the second place there is an arena of competition, a setting in which glory can be won. Curiously, the setting for Tocqueville's discussion of the love of material comfort imitating virtue is a society *without* fixed statuses, because only people who are unsure of their position are sufficiently interested in gain. On the other hand, as Smith emphasizes, they too require an arena of competition, a setting in which not honor but wealth can be won.

The *moral* requirements for subvirtuous equilibrium are more interesting still, because they reveal a paradox. We might have thought that these strategies for putting baser motives into harness for the good make true virtue *unnecessary*. After all, they do get people to perform good deeds, and they do arrest the slide down the slope. This turns out to be false, or at least exaggerated. Far from offering substitutes for virtue, these strategies strongly rely on what little bits of virtue still exist. What they do is stretch these little bits

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[12]Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I–II, q. 84, a. 3. St. Thomas adds that this is why Gregory the Great, *Magna Moralia* 31.17, compared the capital vices to the leaders of an army.

[13]The translation of the *Summa* that I am using renders it "vainglory." Sometimes it is also rendered "pride."

so that we get "more bang for the buck." It is not enough for Augustinian nobles to love glory; they must also have a sense of what truly merits it, otherwise they will seek it not by performing good deeds but by buying votes and poisoning their opponents. It is not enough for Smithian entrepreneurs to love gain; they must also have a sense of restraint, otherwise they will seek tariffs, monopolies, and privileges that destroy the invisible hand. It is not enough for Tocquevillian citizens to love material comfort; they must accept the notion of "self interest rightly understood," otherwise they will step on the faces of their fellows in order to be more comfortable.

<div align="center">Conception Nine</div>

Now comes a point that only Augustine, among these notables, perceived. As we have seen, he was not the only theorist to see that even strategies for using bad motives to suppress still worse bad motives rely on vestiges of good motives. So far as I know, though, he was the only one to perceive that by using these strategies, little by little we *destroy* these vestiges of good motives, so that ultimately the strategies stop working. It is as though I tried to control my love of alcohol by promising myself an extra drink for not drinking too much. I undermine the vestige of virtue that I seem to be stretching; I saw off the limb that I am sitting on. In Augustine's own example of the collapse of the strategy, for a while, Roman nobles really did seek glory by deeds of conspicuous merit. But this way of getting them to do good deeds so inflamed their lust for glory that in time, they were just as pleased to win it by deeds of conspicuous crime. Their age of gold was really an age of iron, and it turned into an age of lead. In Augustine's view, this is the true explanation of why the love of glory finally lost its power to enchant the baser loves and was replaced by love of wealth and power—a calamity that Sallust and Cicero, for all they deplore it, are at a loss to understand. Presumably, something of the same sort had happened earlier in Roman history, when the love of self-rule lost its own power to enchant the baser loves, and was replaced by love of glory.

Earlier, I offered the image of a marble resting in a bowl. But suppose the marble rests not in a bowl, but in a bowl-shaped

depression in a dry lump of slowly rising dough. Just as in the bowl, if I nudge the marble with my finger, it tends to settle back down to the bottom of the depression. But as the dough continues to rise, the depression becomes shallower and shallower, finally turning into a little mound. Deprived of its home, the marble rolls right off of the dough. There *was* a place for it to rest, but the system has changed, and the resting place is no longer there. The equilibrium was stable while it lasted, but it did not last. It disappeared. Picture the last diagram we imagined, of a mountain with little hollows interrupting the otherwise smooth curve of its slopes. We must now imagine that the diagram comes equipped with a built-in eraser, because from time to time, one of the little hollows is rubbed out and turns smooth.

Toward a Tenth Conception

Generalizing Augustine's insight, we may say that the lower foundation is not the stronger one after all. Although locally stable subvirtuous equilibria exist—a number of them, depending on what happens to move us most strongly—nevertheless, in the language of dynamical systems, they are not *structurally* stable. Perhaps in the long run, perhaps in the short, eventually, inevitably, they undermine themselves and crumble. They cannot help it, because they all have the same fatal weakness. He who trains dragons to keep wolves under control must reward the dragons with food. Eventually the dragons grow large enough to get their own food. At this point they set aside their training and do as they please.

Yet the dragons and crumbling ledges cannot be the whole story. If it were, then every society would eventually wind up at the bottom of the mountain. True, the slide would be discontinuous, because each little avalanche would be interrupted when it slammed into a terrace. Even so, each little terrace would crumble, leading to another little avalanche. History would reveal a steady, global decline. Is this what we see? Plainly not. What we see is a patch-work. Here a culture becomes more virtuous; there one becomes more corrupt. A society may also become more virtuous in one dimension while decaying in another. Not only do civilizations die a smoldering death, but they rise again from the embers. Let us not forget that this happens even among pagan nations that are aliens to

grace; or perhaps we should say that it happens among pagan nations where the movements of God's mercy are unknown to us. That it does happen is unmistakable, but of how it happens, we know almost nothing.   □

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