

THE SOCIAL VIRTUES¹

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LET us proceed, in a very humdrum way, from the general to the particular. A word first, then about what virtue is. It is a perfection of our nature. It means, literally, strength. The Latin word *virtus* comes from *vir*, a man, and the basic idea is one of manliness or manhood, if the ladies will pardon so masculine an attitude; but manliness not so much distinguished from womanliness as from childishness. Virtue is the proper characteristic of the adult. The virtues are firmly rooted dispositions or habits or attitudes by which our faculties are given a bias towards the performance of good actions instead of bad actions—the faculties we are concerned with in the moral life being the will and the sense appetites, not the mind, except for the key virtue of prudence, of which more anon. Left to themselves the other faculties lack direction, and just dissipate their energies aimlessly. They have to be brought under the control of reason (the responsibility of prudence) and of grace (the responsibility of charity), to be kept on the right road, with their energies concentrated in the direction that points to our final perfection and happiness, which is the vision of God in heaven.

We need many virtues, because we are complex beings, placed in a complex environment, and with a—well, perhaps not complex destiny, but a destiny of elaborate richness before us. We need virtues to put us right with ourselves, to establish the control of reason over the animal in us—to make us good rational animals, you might say; such virtues as self-control, temperance, chastity, courage, patience, and so on. At the other end of the scale we need virtues to put us right with God, to establish his control over our reason, to make us, in a sense, gods, or partakers of the divine nature, as St Peter puts it; the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, which put us in immediate contact with God, and our destiny in heaven.

And in between these two extremes we need virtues to put us right with each other—to make us, quite simply, good human beings, because man's natural perfection is only to be found in the society of man. In Aristotle's well-worn phrase, man is a political

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animal—by which he did not mean a born politician, but as we would put it today, a social animal, naturally inclined to associate with his kind in a *polis* or city or society, and needing therefore the social virtues.

Before we actually consider them, let us take a look at what they are all about—namely, at society. Calling man a social animal is far from the same thing as calling him a gregarious animal. A mere herd or flock, or pack, in the case of men a crowd, is a group assembled by instinctive impulses, and controlled by the passions of the sense appetites, sometimes harmless enough, like the camaraderie, the nice warm feeling you get in a good-humoured crowd, which is a very elementary form of love—sometimes more dangerous ones, like fear, anger, hatred. The virtues you need in order to behave properly in a crowd are not the social virtues but the virtues of passion control, which belong to the first group I mentioned. A society, as distinct from a crowd, is a group assembled on a rational basis, and rationally organized. A society implies an awareness among its members of the relationships that constitute it, an awareness of their own and each other's place in the society. The reasonableness of a society as contrasted with a herd does not make it something merely artificial and non-natural. On the contrary, it is the specifically natural grouping for human beings, while the herd, though natural to various animals, is a sub-natural or even unnatural form of human association.

It is then these various relationships which link us up together in society that the social virtues are concerned with. The cardinal social virtue, which is concerned with society as such, and with our relationships with our fellow members as such, is *justitia*—I am afraid I will have to call it justice, though I am reluctant to do so, because the English word 'justice' is much more concrete in meaning than the Latin *justitia*; it is really our word for the Latin *jus*, which is precisely the lawful relationship between men, not the virtue concerned with that relationship. Justice, in English, is a *thing*, something we seek in the courts, something that is done, established, enforced. For the virtue that is concerned with this thing, I think the best English word is 'fairness'. The adjective 'just' we do use to describe both persons and things, and the adjective 'fair' also; but the nouns get distributed, justice to things, fairness to persons.

Fairness then, *justitia*, is defined as the firm and continual will—because it is a virtue that precisely perfects and disciplines the will, not the mind or the lower appetites—the firm will of giving every man the justice, the *jus*, due to him, giving him a *square deal*. I would emphasize this metaphor of a square deal, of being fair and square, straight and not crooked in our dealings, derived from such geometrical crafts as carpentry; it is common, with variations, to all languages, and expresses the essence of what justice is. Justice consists in the proper balance or equality between persons as members of society, and the virtue of fairness or straightness is directed to maintaining that balance in their mutual transactions, keeping the relationship properly stabilized or *adjusted*. Hence the symbol of justice, a pair of scales.

The virtue of fairness, then, implies two things. It implies a relationship of *equality* with another person in some respect; it is, in the scholastic phrase, *ad alterum*, towards another (not *ad alium*, towards any other, but *ad alterum*, the other of two, the other member of a pair or couple; as related by justice to each other, we are linked in pairs, man to man, buyer to seller, master to servant, and so on). Secondly it implies a strict *debt*, an obligation to give the other man his *due*. He has a strict right to this equality with you in this particular regard, and you have the strict duty of respecting it. No vagueness about it. Justice is something very cut and dried, fairness is the virtue of the square cut, the cut and dried, the rigid.

According to three ways in which equality or balance is to be found in a society, there are three sorts of justice, and three sorts of fairness. There is the balance between private persons, or persons regardless of their status, the justice that governs our commercial activities, our contracts of employment, that imposes obligations of respecting other people's life, property, good name, human dignity, reputation, etc. It calls for the same sense of fairness, and the same manifestation of fairness in us all, from the queen to the docker, the pope to the altar-boy. Then there is the balance between individuals which can only be maintained by the authority over them. The sergeant-major has the obligation of being fair in the distribution of fatigues, of distributing them evenly, according to a certain equality, but not, this time, an absolute or arithmetical equality. It is unfair if one recruit is given more dirty work than another, but it is not unfair if a

recruit is given more dirty work than a corporal. And the same principle applies, in reverse, to the plums as well as to the chores. Justice consists here in maintaining an equality of proportion; the status of the recruit must bear the same proportion to his plums and chores, as the status of the corporal bears to *his* plums and chores. The corporal is entitled to more plums and less chores because his greater responsibility and length of service give him a higher status. It is the principle of wage differentials, which was at issue in the railway strike in 1955. This form of justice is the special responsibility of the person in authority, but clearly it is the special *interest* of his subordinates. Note that it is still concerned with the balance between private persons, but considered now as more than mere individuals.

The third and chief form of justice is concerned directly with the *public* interest, the common good. It balances the duties and rights of the individual *vis-à-vis* the society he belongs to, and *vis-à-vis* other individuals as representing or serving the society. The form of the virtue of fairness that safeguards it might be called good citizenship. The good citizen is the just man in a pre-eminent sense. It concerns equally those in authority and those subject to it, but in different ways. It obliges authority to the making and enforcing of law in the public interest, and it obliges subjects to the keeping of law in the public interest. So one of the technical names for it is legal justice. The just man is the law-abiding man. The just judge is the law-enforcing judge. The just prince or ruler, or legislator, is the one who makes good laws.

It is, I hope, clear from this brief summary that justice in all these three closely interlocking forms is something utterly objective. It has nothing to do with our feelings, sentiments, likes and dislikes, hopes and fears. It is concerned only with rectifying, balancing our external activities, our external possessions, as they affect other people. So the virtue concerned with this reality must also be entirely objective. The good which it is concerned to achieve and preserve is something beyond the purview of our affective, passionate, life, and can only be touched by the will. And the only guide the will can find to direct it in this matter is the reason. The virtue of prudence—of clear common sense, let us call it—goes hand in hand with the virtue of justice or fairness. All the virtues, self-control and courage and the rest, call for prudence in their exercise, since they are in fact the stamp

of reason on our affective or passionate life. But justice calls for it in a unique way. If you want to be fair or just, you cannot escape the obligation of frequently devoting hard thought to what in any given circumstance is the fair or just thing to do: particularly so in the complexities of modern society. The present *malaise* in trade union affairs shows that much heavy thinking still needs to be done in that sphere.

But it may also have struck you that justice as so far described is a very stark thing. In fact the relationships it constitutes and governs are no more than the skeleton of the social structure. Its flesh and blood are relationships that escape the almost geometrical rules and equations of strict justice. Now we have seen that justice implies two things: a relationship of equality, or balance between distinct persons, and the rendering of something strictly *due* to them, a *debt*. According then as we find relationships which either lack the note of equality and distinction between persons, or do not involve a strict due or debt enforceable at law, we have the matter for various satellite virtues, attached to justice, you might say, as flesh and sinews are attached to the skeleton. And they are very necessary virtues. Without them a *régime* of sheer justice would be uncommonly irksome, a *régime* of beasts, even though, like the great Dr Arnold, of just beasts.

First of all, then, where the relationship involved is not one of equality, though there is a strict debt due. I will only mention the virtue connected with one such relationship here, that of filial piety, which governs the relationships of offspring to their parents. I say offspring, not just to be slightly pompous, but so that it may be clear that this virtue imposes duties on us throughout our lives, not just when we are children, although its manifestations alter as we grow up and achieve in many respects a certain equality with our parents. But precisely as our parents, they are always our *majores*, our greater ones, who have done something for us, namely, produced us and brought us up, which nothing we may do can ever fully repay; we can never equalize the mutual obligation. So the commandment is to 'honour thy father and mother'; not to do them justice, because you never can, but to acknowledge your permanent indebtedness by honouring them, and in a very concrete, material fashion, if the occasion arises.

It perhaps needs emphasizing nowadays, just as it was rather

over-emphasized a hundred years ago, that we owe our parents respect and duty, in *addition* to affection. Affection, indeed, cannot strictly be owed, or demanded; duty can. The corresponding duty of parents to children is less easy to place; strict duty ceases once the children are grown up. Before that the duty of educating and bringing them up is more a public obligation to society than a private one to the children. The children are in a sense a sort of part or extension of the parents' selves, and you cannot, in the strict sense, owe obligations to yourself. But both ways, children to parents and parents to children, affection is not enough by itself to build up good family life. Without this element of filial piety and the corresponding parental piety, this element of quasi-justice, family life lacks principle and strength.

The notion of filial piety can be extended to other persons or institutions which are or have been *in loco parentis* to us; school, university, home-town, country. Thus civic pride, public spirit, and patriotism are more than just good citizenship and loyalty, which we owe in strict justice. They add a certain nobility and idealism, they do begin to engage the feelings and affections which justice, as such, excludes.

Then there are the virtues which govern our relations with people, as our equals indeed, more or less, but in matters where there is no strictly definable, legally enforceable debt or due, but only what is called a moral debt—something we owe as much to our own sense of honour and self-respect as to the other persons. They are the virtues which lend grace to social intercourse, without endangering the firmness of its foundations. There is the virtue of frankness, of telling the truth, which is indeed a strict moral obligation, but not exactly a legal one, except in certain contexts. Its social value is shown by its opposite vices, deceit, hypocrisy, flattery as a form of insincerity, all of which tend to undermine the security of social relationships. Then there is gratitude, and the virtue which especially engenders it, generosity, or liberality, virtues which set themselves precisely to go beyond the strict claims of justice and soften its sharp edges.

In passing, though, I would mention a virtue which is the opposite number of gratitude, the response not to men's goodness in our regard, but their breach of it. In Latin it is *vindicta* which means revenge, which we do not usually think of as virtuous. But there can be a virtuous reality there; St Paul mentions it in

II Cor. vii, 11: 'Behold this very thing, that you are made sad according to God, what carefulness it works in you, yea indignation, yea desire, yea fear, yea zeal, yea revenge'. Righteous indignation, I suppose we call it, a zeal to put wrongs right, to clean up corruption, to break gang bosses, and petty tyrants, and so forth. It is the virtue that sent our Lord into the temple to chase out the money-lenders. It operates over and above any strict duty a person may have by reason of his office to curb or punish crime. It is a virtue to check our tendency to be too easy-going; but it clearly calls for the tight control of prudence in its exercise.

Finally, the most graceful of the social virtues, what in Latin is called *affabilitas*, and in English is best called, I think, good manners, or courtesy, or considerateness. More than just being polite, it includes such elementary decencies as leaving the bath clean, being punctual for your appointments, being ready to apologize and so forth; something that everyone can and should show to everyone else, superior to subordinate as well as *vice versa*; the customer to the shop assistant, the judge to the prisoner, the gaoler to the convict, the wife to the husband, the boss to me—even one schoolboy to another. A virtue that cannot be overestimated, though I would not go so far as to say that the moral life hinges on it. I would just remind you that this, like all these virtues, can be offended against, not only by the direct contrary, sheer rudeness in this instance, but also by being parodied by a vice that bears some resemblance to the virtue. It is possible to be polite to excess, either in a smarmy, flattering sort of way, or by smothering people with excessive attentions, in a way that overhospitable hosts sometimes have—a practice more designed to minister to their own vanity than to put their guests at their ease.

I have left to the last any consideration of Christian charity, which might be thought to be the social virtue *par excellence*. It has, of course, immeasurable social repercussions, but in its essence it is not a social virtue at all. The essence of charity is to join us directly, without any intermediary, to God, and through God and in him to our neighbour. It is indeed the characteristic of all love, of which charity is the supreme type, to unite the lover and the loved one. This is seen most obviously in the case of married love; they shall be two in *one* flesh—what God has

joined let not man put asunder. Justice on the other hand, our basic social virtue, precisely envisages people not as united, but as distinct, its whole function being to maintain a balance of equality between two terms. So we could say, by forcing the meaning of words a little, that justice constructs a society, charity forges a community. Justice establishes a framework of relationships in which each man can go about his lawful occasions; charity fuses people into one body, in which they have but one heart and one soul in God, as St Luke says of the primitive Church in the Acts. Justice is a static virtue, its ideal, equilibrium; charity, like all love, is dynamic, its ideal, movement and life.

Let us see how love, at all its levels, and justice, which only has one level, the rational, interact. Love, remember, unites; it takes the lover out of himself to merge him in what he loves. A disordered passionate love takes him out of himself to *submerge* his personality in a world of unreason; he runs away from himself downwards, making himself either a pernicious, or at best a useless, member of society. Such love clearly has to be curbed by justice either by applying external sanctions, or by calling on and deploying internally the virtues of passion control.

Well-ordered human love, the love of friends and of families, does not submerge the personality, but it does merge it in a certain fusion with the personality of the beloved, to the enrichment of both. They *share* each other's lives. But on the purely human level, keeping religion out of it for the moment, it seems to me, though perhaps you may differ here, that even this good love must be subordinated to justice, not *vice versa*. The purely human ideal must be of a stable society in a harmonious equilibrium. If the union of friendship instead of the rational pattern of justice is the ultimate value in a society, then the ideal is the fusion of the personalities of all the members of the group into a sort of superpersonality. The result is the aggressive society, the cult of the superman, the swamping of the individual conscience in an amoral communal romanticism of blood and soil and so forth—the same effects indeed as those of disordered passionate love, but on the grand scale. Society has sunk into the herd, a herd not of buffaloes but of Bacchanals.

But now divine love, charity. It too tends to merge all the personalities of the group into a superpersonality, but our superman is Christ, who does not swamp, but quickens the individual

conscience. With charity, we run away from ourselves not downwards but upwards, to find ourselves again transformed. Society is left behind again, but transcended this time; it has risen, not sunk, into the herd, into the flock, to use the more biblical word, into God's flock. So the ultimate value in our society, the Church, is the union of friendship above the pattern of justice, but the union of friendship with and in God.

And this love, this urge to a quasi-divine unity of personalities, does not dissolve justice, it presupposes it. It uses the equilibrium of justice as its *point d'appui*. Indeed it really makes the equilibrium easier to maintain, just as the equilibrium of a bicycle is easier to maintain when it is moving than when it is standing still. Justice provides the bicycle—a tandem; charity rides it.

Charity deals with justice most obviously under the guise of mercy, or forgiveness, which is the characteristic act of mercy. But you cannot actually forgive someone unless he is sorry for what he has done, which means unless he recognizes the justice of the punishment due, and desires to make amends, to redress the balance of justice he has upset. Charity loves all men, but the man who is being actively unjust it can only love potentially, that is it cannot act towards him to achieve a union with him, to embrace him, until he stops being unjust. It can only approach him indirectly.

Even more does charity presuppose justice, or fairness in the charitable person. Your love for a person whom you are denying his rights to is pretty hollow. The first step in loving him is to deal fairly with him. Charity makes special use of the satellite forms of justice, generosity, filial piety, courtesy, etc. For these, unlike strict justice or fairness, do allow an entry for the affections and human sentiments. In practice it is usually hard to distinguish between honouring your parents and loving them. You show them dutiful affection, or affectionate duty, according to taste. These virtues are the first steps towards a unity of personalities, after justice has cleared the ground by rectifying all the external apparatus of our personalities, our rights, duties, possessions, activities. To end with the briefest of parables. Justice draws up the marriage contract, settles the dowry and the bride's portion; the secondary social virtues do the courting; but it is charity that celebrates the wedding.

