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Blessed Tolerance: The Virtue of a Republic in Decline

It's not a pretty sight. The "democratic man" so fixed on his beloved self-interest as he is, and as he is taught to be, is soon tyrannized by his own lusts, and next it is he who is the tyrant: first to his family, next to his fellows, next to his church, and finally to his state — that is, to anybody and anything which stands in the way of his many lusts.



In the process, his faith, his morals, his previously held opinions — now classed as the "dreams of youth" — are overthrown by his late "emancipation."

Thus, a change in "private" moral conduct, Plato observes, becomes at last very public indeed.

The trouble starts when equality before the law morphs into the bizarre belief that all moral viewpoints are equally valid — with these two politically correct provisos: 1. Self-love and self-indulgence must be ranked as the greatest of rights, and 2. Toleration — for every sort of extreme — must be placed upon a throne and worshipped by one and all as the highest of all virtues.

Such an equality! So very ancient! So very modern!

Perhaps the Western Classics, no longer taught at our colleges and universities, have something to teach us after all. So let's give Plato a try and see. The dialogue is between Socrates and Adeimantus; Socrates speaks first:

S. [T]he tyrannical man in the true sense of the word comes into being when, either under the influence of nature, or habit, or both, he becomes drunken, lustful, passionate[.] O my friend, is not that so?

A. Assuredly.

S. Such is the man and such is his origin. And next, how does he live?

A. Suppose, as people facetiously say, you were to tell me.

S. I imagine, I said, at the next step in his progress, that there will be feasts and carousals and revellings and courtezans, and all that sort of thing; [Self-]Love is the lord of the house within him, and orders all the concerns of his soul.

A. That is certain.

S. Yes; and every day and every night desires grow up many and formidable, and their demands are many.

A. They are indeed, he said.

S. His revenues, if he has any, are soon spent.

A. True.

S. Then comes debt and the cutting down of his property.

A. Of course.



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S. When he has nothing left, must not his desires, crowding in the nest like young ravens, be crying aloud for food; and he, goaded on by them, and especially by [self-]love himself, who is in a manner the captain of them, is in a frenzy, and would fain discover whom he can defraud or despoil of his property, in order that he may gratify them?

A. Yes, that is sure to be the case.

S. He must have money, no matter how, if he is to escape horrid pains and pangs.

A. He must.

S. And as in himself there was a succession of pleasures, and the new got the better of the old and took away their rights, so he being younger will claim to have more than his father and his mother, and if he has spent his own share of the property, he will take a slice of theirs.

A. No doubt he will.

S. And if his parents will not give way, then he will try first of all to cheat and deceive them.

A. Very true.

S. And if he fails, then he will use force and plunder them.

A. Yes, probably.

S. And if the old man and woman fight for their own, what then, my friend? Will the creature feel any compunction at tyrannizing over them?

A. Nay, he said, I should not feel at all comfortable about his parents.

S. But, O heavens! Adeimantus, on account of some newfangled love of a harlot, who is anything but a necessary connection, can you believe that he would strike the mother who is his ancient friend and necessary to his very existence, and would place her under the authority of the other, when she is brought under the same roof with her; or that, under like circumstances, he would do the same to his withered old father, first and most indispensable of friends, for the sake of some newly found blooming youth who is the reverse of indispensable?

A. Yes, indeed, he said; I believe that he would.

S. Truly, then, I said, a tyrannical son is a blessing to his father and mother.

A. He is indeed, he replied.

S. He first takes their property, and when that falls, and pleasures are beginning to swarm in the hive of his soul, then he breaks into a house, or steals the garments of some nightly wayfarer; next he proceeds to clear a temple. Meanwhile the old opinions which he had when a child, and which gave judgment about good and evil, are overthrown by those others which have just been emancipated, and are now the bodyguard of [self-]love and share his empire. These in his democratic days, when he was still subject to the laws and to his father, were only let loose in the dreams of sleep. But now that he is under the dominion of [Self-]love, he becomes always and in waking reality what he was then very rarely and in a dream only; he will commit the foulest murder, or eat forbidden food, or be guilty of any other horrid act. [Self-]Love is his tyrant, and lives lordly in him and lawlessly, and being himself a king, leads him on, as a tyrant leads a State, to the performance of any reckless deed by which he can maintain himself and the rabble of his associates, whether those whom evil communications have brought in from without, or those whom



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he himself has allowed to break loose within him by reason of a similar evil nature in himself. Have we not here a picture of his way of life?

A. Yes, indeed, he said.

S. And if there are only a few of them in the State, the rest of the people are well disposed, they go away and become the bodyguard or mercenary soldiers of some other tyrant who may probably want them for a war; and if there is no war, they stay at home and do many little pieces of mischief in the city.

A. What sort of mischief?

S. For example, they are the thieves, burglars, cutpurses, footpads, robbers of temples, man-stealers of the community; or if they are able to speak they turn informers, and bear false witness, and take bribes.

A. A small catalogue of evils, even if the perpetrators of them are few in number.

S. Yes, I said; but small and great are comparative terms, and all these things, in the misery and evil which they inflict upon a State, do not come within a thousand miles of the tyrant; when this noxious class and their followers grow numerous and become conscious of their strength, assisted by the infatuation of the people, they choose from among themselves the one who has most of the tyrant in his own soul, and him they create their tyrant.

A. Yes, he said, and he will be the most fit to be a tyrant.

S. If the people yield, well and good; but if they resist him, as he began by beating his own father and mother, so now, if he has the power, he beats them, and will keep his dear old fatherland or motherland, as the Cretans say, in subjection to his young retainers whom he has introduced to be their rulers and masters. This is the end of his passions and desires.

A. Exactly.

S. When such men are only private individuals and before they get power, this is their character; they associate entirely with their own flatterers or ready tools; or if they want anything from anybody, they in their turn are equally ready to bow down before them: they profess every sort of affection for them; but when they have gained their point they know them no more.

A. Yes, truly.

S. They are always either the masters or servants and never the friends of anybody; the tyrant never tastes of true freedom or friendship.

A. Certainly not.

S. And may we not rightly call such men treacherous?

A. No question.

S. Also they are utterly unjust, if we were right in our notion of justice?

A. Yes, he said, and we were perfectly right.

S. Let us then sum up in a word, I said, the character of the worst man: he is the waking reality of what we dreamed.

A. Most true.



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And this is he who being by nature most of a tyrant bears rule, and the longer he lives the more of a tyrant he becomes.

Two millennia ago, Plato reasoned right to the core about the democratic man, and confronted some of the most uncomfortable and challenging truths about him. His so-called "private" moral behavior eventually goes public. "Liberty" defined as "license" is not liberty at all, never was, never will be, for it is inevitable, we reap what we sow. And so, culture defined by selfishness, and which demands tolerance for the sins that accompany the selfish, breeds a nation of idlers and infidels, drunkards and dependents, scoundrels and assassins, power-hungry politicians and apathetic citizens, and by and by, a nation ripe for tyranny, or in the grips of it already.

It sounds like today's bad news. The good news is, and Plato understood it, the "anything goes" paradigm, and its accompanying tendency toward moral anarchy (and thus every sort of criminal behavior) naturally spawns a revival of conservatism. We see that today ... everywhere.

The challenging news is, and Plato knew this as well, the political man knows all about the probability of reactive conservatism. He, in fact, plans on it, perhaps prays for it. He knows "knee jerk" conservative movements can be and often have been hijacked by opportunists and revolutionaries, men who pedal a law-and-order agenda (along with other promised reforms) not to save the country, but to get elected or to make things worse. And so another threat, another by-product of the immorality of the self-centered that democracies tolerate. Beware.

The high price of tolerance is upon us. Libertine, self-centered, "privacy"-protecting, "tolerant" democracies, unchecked by law and morality (the stuff of true republics), undermine the liberty they presume to proclaim and protect. Common sense and patriotic duty ought to inspire us to say "No!" to a continuation of this free-for-all tolerance. "No!" to the rejection of the Judeo-Christian ethic as the foundation of our law. "No!" to a continuation of our public schools teaching the rising generation (our kids and grandkids) the misguided moral relativism and tolerance of the gospel of Humanism. And "No!" to anarchist solutions to a federal government out of control imposing all this mess on us. We need a return to the limited government and the Judeo-Christian ethic of our forefathers, not a jump into the madness of anarchy and separatism.

Americans once preached and practiced the Christian version of tolerance: "Hate the sin, love the sinner." It was and is a self-empowering, liberty preserving doctrine. It helps us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to be free to lift him if he will, for it reminds the sinner that a standard that always existed still does exist and that his neighbor loves him enough, and loves society enough, to say "No!" to the sin, but "Yes!" to aiding his neighbor reform and reach that happier state. Democratic tolerance, however, is the stuff of slavery, individual and collective. It was back in the day of Plato. It still is today. It is, as Plato put it, "the most shameful and vile" of things to be "conquered by yourself." When it comes to nations that adopt that uninspired humanist version of tolerance it is that most "shameful and vile" of national mistakes. It is to embrace a sure-fire prescription for national suicide, to ready ourselves to vote ourselves in a tyranny, and to insure that when that tyranny is in place we will lack the collective moral fortitude necessary to fight back.

We're not there yet.

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