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THE COMMUNITARIAN CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

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In the last ten or fifteen years, liberalism has come under criticism not only from so-called conservatives, who have more in common with liberals than they care to admit, but from those who appeal from liberalism not to individualism but to the ideal of community. The emergence of this communitarian criticism of liberalism, which cuts more deeply than the standard right-wing criticism, is one of the most hopeful developments in our recent history, not least because it promises to break the political deadlock between welfare liberalism and economic individualism, the opposition of which has informed so much of our politics in the past. The promise of communitarian thought is already suggested by the difficulty of situating it on the conventional political spectrum ranging from left to right. Without claiming to occupy any sort of vital center, and certainly without presenting itself as a compromise between two extremes, it is equally critical of left and right, and part of its value, as I shall try to show, lies in its ability to uncover the common assumptions and premises underlying these apparently antagonistic positions.

Because the communitarian point of view has yet to make a decisive imprint on our social and political thought, its exponents are not exactly household names. In many ways the most important thinker among them is Alasdair MacIntyre, whose masterpiece, *After Virtue* (1981), has provoked a great deal of commentary and criticism. Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982) is another indispensable book. The interested reader should also consult Thomas Spragens' *Irony of Liberal Reason* (1981), Jeffrey Stout's *Flight from Authority* (1981), and Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice* (1983), not to mention

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the exhaustive historical scholarship on civic humanism and republicanism, much of it inspired by J.G.A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975). Finally there is the wide-ranging study of individualism by Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, recently published under the title *Habits of the Heart* (1985). No other book has done so much to bring the communitarian critique of liberalism to general attention.

It would be misleading to treat these writers as a school. What follows will minimize the differences among them in the hope of identifying the general trend of this type of thought. I shall elaborate these ideas in ways that some of their authors might not endorse. Nevertheless I shall try to remain faithful to the spirit and basic principles of communitarian thought, as I understand them.

Communitarians share with the right an opposition to bureaucracy, but they do not stop with an attack on governmental bureaucracy; they are equally sensitive to the dangers of corporate bureaucracy in the misnamed private sector. Indeed they tend to reject the conventional distinction between the public and the private realm, which figures so prominently both in the liberal tradition and in the tradition of economic individualism that has grown up side by side with it. The rise of corporate bureaucracy is only one of a number of developments that have undermined the usefulness of this distinction. Another such development is the infiltration of personal life by the market, as when modes of personal management and conflict resolution derived from labor relations come to be applied to familial relations, or again, when family life comes to be considered as a set of contractual obligations. The recognition that an institution like the family can no longer serve, if it ever did, as a haven in a heartless world prompts a search for a better way of describing its importance and its value. The fact that the history of the family, moreover—and of modern life in general—can be characterized with equal plausibility as the privatization of experience (the "fall of public man") and the invasion of privacy by the "social ethic" that allegedly prevails in a society of "organization men"—further weakens the explanatory power of the public and the private as organizing categories. Communitarian thought tries to find a way out of this conceptual stalemate,

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just as it hopes to end the political stalemate between left and right.

Communitarianism, then, rejects the kind of liberalism that seeks to "empower" exploited groups by conquering the state and by extending its powers on their behalf; but it does not propose to leave them at the mercy of the corporations. It proposes a general strategy of devolution or decentralization, designed to end the dominance of large organizations and to remodel our institutions on a human scale. It attacks bureaucracy and large-scale organization, however, not in the name of individual freedom or the free market but in the name of continuity and tradition.

The dispute between communitarians and liberals hinges on opposing conceptions of the self. Where liberals conceive of the self as essentially unencumbered and free to choose among a wide range of alternatives, communitarians insist that the self is situated in and constituted by tradition, membership in a historically rooted community. Liberals regard tradition as a collection of prejudices that prevent the individual not only from understanding his own needs but from sympathetic understanding of others. They exalt cosmopolitanism over provincialism, which in their eyes encourages conformity and intolerance. Communitarians, on the other hand, reply that "intolerance flourishes most," in Sandel's words, "where forms of life are dislocated, roots unsettled, traditions undone." (Sandel, 1982:17)

I said a moment ago that the crystallization of this communitarian critique of liberalism is one of the most hopeful signs of the times. I did not mean to imply, however, that it is something altogether new. On the contrary, it has a long history, which can be traced all the way back to the civic republicanism of the Renaissance, which historians are so eager to recover. Its historical career parallels that of liberalism itself, and it makes itself heard, however faintly at times, as a counterpoint to liberalism, sometimes, indeed, becoming almost indistinguishable from it. In the 20th century, the communitarian tradition was present as an undercurrent in prewar progressivism, as interpreted by writers like Josiah Royce, Jane Addams, Mary Parker Follett, and Randolph Bourne; and it was carried on in late years by John Collier, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, and

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Paul Goodman, among others. It was an important ingredient in the new left, and the recent revival of communitarian thought derives most immediately from the side of the new left that condemned bureaucracy and the "technological society" and favored decentralization, environmentalism, and "appropriate technologies."

Communitarianism has had its most important influence, perhaps, not so much on 20th-century social and cultural criticism as on 20th-century sociology, though even here it represents a minor, often discordant note. One can distinguish two traditions in American sociology. The first seeks to replace spontaneous cooperation, thought to characterize small-scale communities, with a new science of social control administered by experts. The second seeks to revive and preserve community values in complex industrial nation-states. How to accomplish this second objective was the problem bequeathed to sociology by the classical theorists who invented the modern science of society, especially by Tonnies, Weber, and Durkheim. Modern social theory had its very foundation in the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, community and society; and much of its appeal to a broader audience lay in its claim to show how the two might be reconciled—how the advantages of the small group might be restored, as a countervailing influence, in societies based on the principle of bureaucratic anonymity. The decline of the extended family, the widening gap between generations, the weakening of traditions, the uprooting of individuals from the land, and the commercialization of leisure all seemed to disrupt the transmission of social norms from one generation to the next. Mass society, it appeared, left people without firm moral guidelines. It gave rise to a condition of *anomie*, as Durkheim called it; and the only way to counter this tendency, according to a view that came to be widely held by many students of these developments, was to revive the culture of small face-to-face communities in a new form. The alternative both to the "individual and the crowd," as Follett put it, was the "neglected group," which provided a middle ground "between particularism with all its separatist tendencies, and the crowd with its levelling, its mediocrity, its sameness, perhaps even its hysteria" (1918:152).

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This kind of thinking has now become so familiar that it is difficult to recognize the assumptions behind it. Yet these assumptions must become explicit, and some of them explicitly repudiated, if the communitarian tradition is to free itself from some of the misunderstandings and confusion that have limited its effectiveness in the past. The most important of these assumptions—that shared values, not political institutions or a common political language, provide the only source of social cohesion—strikes us now as the essence of sociological common sense. In fact, however, it represents a radical break from many of the republican principles on which this country was founded. "The chief difficulty of our time," wrote Elton Mayo, "is the breakdown of the social codes that formerly disciplined us to effective working together" (1931:88). All the social controls based on a "vigorous social code," he explained, "have weakened or disappeared" (1931:172). The famous Hawthorne studies conducted by Mayo and his colleagues at the Harvard Business School tried to show how enlightened administration could recreate small groups in industry and provide workers with a sense of belonging. The Hawthorne studies influenced managerial practice and sociological theory alike, encouraging more and more intensive analysis of small groups and their internal dynamics. In his book *The Human Group*, a work that summarized much of this thinking, George Homans raised once again the familiar question: "How can the values of the small group be maintained on the scale of civilization" (1950:466)? Like his predecessors and fellow students of group dynamics, Homans found it impossible to imagine any mechanism of social cohesion except the "spontaneous self-control" of small groups and "imposed control," as he called it—the coercive powers exercised by a highly centralized state (1950:464). "If civilization is to stand, it must maintain, in the relation between the groups that make up society and the central direction of society, some of the features of the small group itself" (1950:468). The most revealing and symptomatic feature of Homan's study is his inability to understand republican institutions except as another attempt to institutionalize patterns of cooperation that arise spontaneously in small groups. "All of these devices," he says, speaking of the Bill of Rights, universal suffrage, and the whole machinery of representative

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government, "are addressed to the problem of maintaining, at the level of a nation if not of a civilization, the values of the small group" (1950:464).

The cult of the "little community," as Robert Redfield called it, has sunk so deeply into our thinking about these matters that we find it more and more difficult to conceive of any form of social solidarity that does not rest on shared values and spontaneous cooperation, on the one hand, or on engineered consent, manipulation, or outright coercion on the other. I will try to show that there is a better way of thinking about the problem of solidarity. Before entering that part of my argument, however, I would like to point out that the myth of the organic community, which is so often associated with criticism of acquisitive individualism, is an important source of the fruitless debate about nostalgia that seems to have become inescapable in discussions of social change and modern life. Because our conception of community life is so highly colored by feelings of nostalgia, the defense of community prompts the rejoinder that it grows out of a flight from modern complexity, a failure of nerve, a refusal to accept the ambiguities and uncertainty that go along with freedom itself. Thus the sociologist L. Digby Baltzell, in the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *The Search for Community in Modern America* (1968), urges the reader to "ask himself whether or not he prefers our kind of voluntary society, which still emphasizes privacy and the minding of one's own business, to the more communal and cohesive, but perhaps more restrictive, societies" of the past. "All too many of us are more or less nostalgic about the good-old-days of spatial cohesion in the small, local community," according to Baltzell. As an example of this attitude, he quotes the definition of community offered by Robert Nisbet.

> By community, I mean something that . . . encompasses all forms of relationships which are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity in time. Community is founded on man conceived in his wholeness rather than in one or another of the roles, taken separately, that he may hold in the social order. It draws its psychological strength from levels of motivation deeper than those of mere volition or interest . . .

The interesting thing about the debate concerning "nostalgia" is that defenders of modernity seldom challenge the sentimen-

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tal conception of the community held by their opponents. Instead of objecting to Nisbet's identification of community with a "submergence of individual will," Baltzell argues merely that the "gradual erosion . . . of the traditional community ties which Professor Nisbet describes," while it has deprived men and women of the security of unquestioned habits and inherited dogmas, has created a society "based on free choice and common interests" (Baltzell, 1968:2-4).

Nostalgia for the little community serves not so much to preserve the past or to understand the ways in which the past unavoidably influences our lives as to idealize lost innocence. The atmosphere of sentimental regret with which it surrounds the past has the effect of denying the past's inescapable influence over the present. Those who deplore the death of the past and those who celebrate it both take it for granted that our age has outgrown its childhood. Both find it difficult to believe that history still haunts our enlightened, disillusioned maturity. Both are governed, in their attitudes toward the past, by the prevailing disbelief in ghosts.

"Our historical consciousness," writes Hans-Georg Gadamer, "is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard" (1975:252). What is missing from the debate about individualism and community, as carried on up until now, is the possibility of a conversational relationship with the past, one that seeks neither to deny the past nor to achieve an imaginative restoration of the past but to enter into a dialogue with the traditions that still shape our view of the world, often in ways in which we are not even aware. Instead of merely addressing the historical record, we need to grasp the ways in which it addresses us. This does not imply a slavish, unquestioning attitude toward authority. Nor does it imply universal agreement. Traditions embody conflict as well as consensus; in many ways this is their most important aspect. As MacIntyre points out, "Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict" (1981:254, 222, 134-6). But if we conceive traditions in this way, instead of emphasizing the uncritical acceptance of authority and the uniformity of opinion that allegedly distinguish so-called traditional societies from the modern societies that rest on a "culture of critical discourse," we have to modify many of our received ideas about the problem of in-

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dividualism and "community." Social solidarity does not rest on shared values or ideological consensus, let alone on an identity of interests; it rests on public conversation. It rests on social and political arrangements that serve to encourage debate instead of foreclosing it; and to encourage debate, moreover, not just about conflicting economic interests but about morality and religion, the ultimate human concerns. Public conversation means the systematic cultivation of the rhetorical arts and of the virtues classically associated with eloquence. It means respect for the power of persuasion, which is quite different, as Gadamer reminds us, from the ability to win every argument. The art of dialectics, he writes, "requires that one does not try to out-argue the other person, but that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion" (1975:330). Nothing testifies more clearly to the debasement of contemporary politics than the equation of "rhetoric" with ideological manipulation, electioneering, and hot air. The devaluation of public discourse is a much more alarming development than the decline of ideological consensus. In order to counter it, we need to develop a political conception of the community, in place of the organic and sentimental conception that now tends to prevail.

A better understanding of tradition, then, sums up the first line of revision to which communitarian theory needs to be exposed. By overemphasizing the importance of shared values, defenders of a communitarian politics expose themselves to the familiar charge that community is simply a euphemism for conformity. The answer to this charge is that tradition, and tradition alone, is precisely what makes it possible for men and women to disagree without trying to resolve their disagreements by the sword.

A second line of revision begins with an analysis of the character-forming discipline of social practices.[1] It is specific practices, not civic life in general, that nourish virtue. We can define practices, following MacIntyre, as common projects in which the participants seek to conform to established standards of excellence. Practices in this sense have nothing to do, as such, with the production of useful objects or with the satisfaction of material needs. They have more in common with play than with activities defined as practical in the conventional

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sense. Judgment or practical reason, as Aristotle understood it, is a mode of thinking not to be confused either with the "expression of private feelings" or aesthetic preferences, with the goal-directed thinking known to the ancients as technical reason, or with the "type of universality characteristic of cognitive reason," science, and speculative philosophy. Aristotle distinguished judgment or *phronesis* both from pure contemplation, which seeks universal truths, and from technique, which seeks merely to solve problems and to arrive at a given goal by the most efficient means. Judgment is the kind of skill one learns in the course of training for a practice (like architecture, medicine, baseball, the performing arts, or the art of political oratory), but it pursues goods internal to that practice, not the external goods that seem so important to us. Considered from this point of view, the choice of means has to be governed by their conformity to standards of excellence designed to extend human capacities for self-understanding and self-mastery.

Every practice requires its own virtues. Manual dexterity obviously counts for more in surgery or piano-playing than it does in most branches of warfare, while certain kinds of physical courage count for less. There is good warrant, however, for singling out judgment as the virtue that is common to all, especially if we distinguish the mere "technique" of piano-playing, say, from musicianship in the larger sense. Whether the frame of reference is music, sports, medicine, or warfare, judgment implies a sense of timing and proportion, a feeling for the relations between the parts and the whole, a painstaking attention to detail which is nevertheless careful not to let details obscure the larger outlines of a performance, a willingness to improvise if necessary, an ability to combine spontaneous feeling with disciplined forethought, a kind of controlled exuberance, and most important and elusive of all, an ability to communicate the inner meaning of an activity to others so that they become vicarious participants. Judgment also implies an understanding of limits—of one's own capacities, of what the occasion will bear, of the narrowness of one's victory over competitors, of the fine line between success and failure, victory and defeat—and it is this recognition of limits, I think, that invests judgment with a moral quality and entitles us to discuss it under the heading not of prudence, with which it clearly has a lot in common,

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but of virtue. Perhaps the point can be stated most simply by saying that while excellence in a practice comes only after exacting technical training and discipline, it rests, at bottom, on qualities appropriately regarded as gifts, which it is the essence of virtue to acknowledge in a spirit of humility and thanksgiving. The consummately gifted practitioner, no less than the religious virtuoso, personifies, if only for a short moment, the state of grace or gratitude.

If it is important to understand why practices are so important to the moral life, it is equally important to understand how easily they are corrupted by ends extrinsic to themselves. Since excellence in a practice often brings an abundance of social rewards, it is notoriously tempting for people to pursue a practice for the wrong reasons—for the sake of money, say, or social status, or simply for the sake of besting one's opponents, in which case it becomes perfectly acceptable to cheat. If they have no talent for the practice in question, the results are deplorable, as patients exposed to routine medical practice can readily testify; but if they do have a calling, as we say, the result is even worse, since the faithless practitioner betrays not only his clients and competitors but his own gifts as well. The point is not just that money and status tempt a practitioner to lose sight of the intrinsic goods he ought to pursue. A more important point is that practices have to be sustained by institutions, which in the very nature of things tend to corrupt the practices they sustain. It isn't just that individuals are tempted by unworthy ambitions but that the institutional structures in which practices are carried out almost unavoidably underwrite and legitimize these ambitions. Thus the university provides a home for scholarship, but it also corrupts scholarship by subjecting it to standards of productivity derived from the marketplace, just as it corrupts instruction by reducing it to the standard units used to measure academic progress and achievement—courses, credits, grades, and cumulative grade point averages. Those who see professionalism as a purely disinterested pursuit of excellence ignore the institutional influences that often subvert this ideal. "Membership in a truly professional community," writes Thomas I. Haskell, echoing Paul Goodman, "(cannot) be based on charm, social standing, personal connection, good character, or perhaps even decency, but on demonstrated intel-

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lectual merit alone" (1977:33). Even if we shared Haskell's high opinion of "intellectual merit alone," we would still have to enter the reservation that it can easily be confused, in the academic marketplace, with the acquisition of professional credentials or, worse, with loyalty to an unspoken consensus. Haskell does not appreciate how easily the ideal of professional disinterestedness can be distorted by the social and political context in which it has grown up.

In any case, "merit," intellectual or otherwise, is a pallid way to refer to the virtues nurtured by the practice of a profession or calling. Part of the usefulness of the concept of practices lies exactly here, in its challenge to the academic short-sightedness that tends to see the professions, the intellectual professions in particular, as the highest (almost the only) form of disinterested activity. The range of practices is much broader, embracing activities having nothing in common except the exercise of judgment in the conquest of gratuitous difficulties. Once we identify what all practices do have in common, we can begin not only to understand the value of pursuits often undervalued by academics but to understand the value of professions themselves, which consists of their capacity to educate judgment, not the encouragement they give to "intellectual merit." The idea of merit, inescapably linked to the idea of dessert, confuses the issue by associating excellence too closely with its social rewards and by implying, moreover, that excellence is largely the product of strenuous effort (which deserves to be recognized and rewarded) instead of an expression of a "gift," the appropriate celebration of which is gratitude rather than the bestowal of prizes, awards, and other tokens of merit.

The virtues have their proper reward, if we insist on using this term at all, in the myths and stories that celebrate successful practice—stories best regarded, it seems to me, as an expression of collective gratitude. Every practice generates traditions, and these are handed down in the form of narratives, which provide the context that makes actions intelligible. Practices depend on and foster a conception of the self, as MacIntyre puts it, that "links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end" (1981:191). By giving an account of our actions, narratives make us accountable—a circumstance, incidentally, that explains why stories must always bear

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the burden of moral education. An account of the virtues is incomplete, then, if it omits the importance of tradition, narrative traditions in particular, in commemorating admirable practice and in refining the standards by which it is judged. This brings us back to the first part of our discussion and links it to the second part, the analysis of judgment and practice. Part of the value of tradition, we can now see, is that it commemorates past achievements (by no means uncritically) and makes us all parties to those achievements—not that it enforces conformity to a common set of values.

Having examined tradition and practice and the links between them, we are now in a better position, I hope, to say just what a community consists of and what a communitarian politics ought to look like. A community consists of a diversity of practices, and its public life ought to nurture these practices, to encourage the widest possible diversity of practices, and to check the influences that tend to corrupt them. This is a more modest conception of politics than the nostalgic, utopian conceptions that have helped to bring communitarianism into disrepute. In the past, the community ideal has usually expressed itself either in a longing for some hypothetical state of nature, a state of primeval innocence antecedent to the invention of politics, or in the grandiose vision of a "great community" based on universal brotherhood and universal agreement. In either version, communitarianism looks forward—or backward—to a form of solidarity in which individuals lose themselves in the mass, in which the competitive spirit has been completely extinguished, and in which people find themselves in such entire agreement that political life becomes unnecessary and withers away. The communitarian ideal, as elaborated in the past, has usually been anti-political—either pre-political or post-political. In the latter form, communitarianism looks forward to a social order in which politics has given way to administration, divisive conflicts having been resolved in such a way that only the technical details of production and distribution remain to be decided in public. It is no wonder that the communitarian tradition, even though it appeals so powerfully to the sociable impulses destined to be frustrated in a competitive, individualistic society, remains suspect. From the time of Plato onward, its social ideal contains unmistakably authoritarian implica-

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tions. Experience indicates, moreover, that the republic of virtue issues in practice in a reign of terror. Even if a virtuous republic in the future somehow managed not to repeat that all too familiar experience, it would still be open to the objection that life in such a state, like the afterlife imagined in the conventional Sunday-school heaven, would be intolerably boring. As William James once said:

> Such pictures of light upon light are vacuous and expressionless. . . . If *this* be the whole fruit of victory, we say, . . . better lose than win the battle, or at all events better ring down the curtain before the last act of the play, so that a business that began so importantly may be saved from so singularly flat a winding-up (1977:601).

Our formulation of the communitarian ideal avoids an outcome so "singularly flat." It does not aim at a republic of virtue in which all differences and distinctions have been forcibly suppressed or flattened out. It conceives of politics not as a way of compelling men to become virtuous but merely as a way of keeping alive the possibility that they may learn virtue by fitting themselves for a congenial practice. It insists, moreover, on the need for a plurality of practices, representative of the full range of human talents and inclinations. No single practice must be allowed to monopolize the definition of virtue—as the practice of war monopolizes it in the Spartan version of the republican tradition that has provided such a constant source of inspiration for communitarian theorists.

The attempt to answer liberal objections to the communitarian ideal, unfortunately, opens it to another objection: that in this revised form it becomes indistinguishable from liberalism itself. Isn't this pluralism exactly what liberals have always advocated? Isn't it precisely the essence of liberalism that the state should remain neutral in the struggle between rival values, rival religions, and rival definitions of virtue, providing only the public order that makes it possible for individuals to work out their salvation in private? What keeps our analysis from coming full circle, since it was the impoverishment of public life under liberalism, the relegation of all the important questions to the obscurity of private life, that gave rise in the first place to a communitarian critique of liberalism? In ridding itself of its objectionable features, hasn't this communitarian critique, in our hands, come to resemble what it criticizes?

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These are important and difficult questions, but I cannot hope to do justice to them here. All I can do is to indicate what seems to me the heart of the matter, namely the difference between a state that protects privacy and one that protects practice. Liberalism assumes that men and women wish only to pursue their private purposes and that they form associations only in order to advance these purposes more effectively. Its solicitude for individual rights extends to the right of association, but it finds it hard to conceive of voluntary associations except as pressure groups seeking to influence public policy in their own favor. This blindness deprives liberals of any perspective from which to criticize the corruption of practice by external goods. Pressure groups are by definition interested in external goods alone—quite appropriately, from a liberal point of view—and the task of politics, accordingly, is merely to decide among their competing claims. Internal goods, on the other hand, are no business of the state, in the liberal view. The state obviously has no authority to tell doctors how to practice medicine or baseball players how to field their positions. It steps in only when these practices acquire a public interest, when they affect the distribution of external rewards, in other words, or—not to put too fine a point on it—when there is money involved.

My objection to the liberal view of things can be simply summarized by saying that this is too narrow a conception of the public interest. The public also has an interest—one that should not be thought of principally as a material interest, but rather as a moral interest—in medicine or sports that are practiced with devotion, with primary attention to internal goods. This interest will not be satisfied, of course, by direct state interference with those practices, but it demands a policy, a far more effective policy than anything that now exists, designed to limit the degree to which they are compromised and corrupted by the pursuit of external goods.

The distinction between public and private, so dear to liberals, doesn't catch the important concerns, the ones that really matter. On the one hand, it takes too narrow a view of the public interest. On the other hand, it trivializes the activities that need to be protected and nourished. Liberalism is at its best when it condemns invasions of privacy; but this best is still not

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good enough. The concept of privacy has no moral content. It equates freedom not with submission to an exacting discipline but with the absence of constraint, the right to do as one pleases, the right to change one's mind every day. Both liberals and our so-called conservatives adhere to this empty ideal of freedom and privacy; they disagree only about what is truly private. For liberals, it is freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of sexual preference that need to be protected, whereas those who call themselves conservatives value economic freedom more highly. The left understands private life as primarily cultural, the right as primarily economic. When the left attacks individualism, it is "acquisitive individualism" that is referred to. The right, on the other hand, specializes in condemnation of ethical individualism and cultural anarchy. A more comprehensive indictment of individualism is called for; and the best way to bring it into focus is to organize political discourse not around the "invasion of privacy" but around the corruption of internal goods by external goods, the corruption of practices by institutions. Thus the objection to intrusive journalism is not so much that it violates the individual's privacy (the legal status of which has never been terribly clear) as that it trivializes the lives of those who might otherwise serve as models of character, discipline, and virtue. This example, if you will consider the implications, ought to indicate how a wide variety of familiar issues—including the separation of church and state, say, or the regulation of big-time athletics—can be recast in a new and much richer form once we set aside the distinction between private and public life and talk instead about practices and institutions. I apologize for the underdevelopment of such concrete illustrations in this paper, but it was first necessary to clear the ground and to let in a little light, a little fresh air, in the hope that freshly planted seeds could then take root and begin to grow.

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NOTE

1. The following part of my argument owes a good deal to Jeffrey Stout's essay, "Liberal Society and the Languages of Morals," which proposes that a good political order is one that sustains and protects the "goods internal to social practices" (1986:54). I would enter a mild dissent, however, from Stout's further contention that we "barely know how to talk about social practices . . . at all" (1986:55). The sociology of work has documented the "degradation of work," in Harry Braverman's phrase, by the eradication of its artistic and playful aspect, and the sociology of the professions abounds in examples of the way external goods corrupt professional practices of all kinds. The corruption of athletics by the mania for winning at all costs provides another familiar example of the corruption of practices by external goods or as Huizinga put it, by the attenuation of the "play element" in culture. In short, there is a richer sociological account of practices than Stout recognizes, although it does not, of course, very often present itself as such.

   A more serious disagreement concerns Stout's attempt to reconcile communitarianism with liberalism. I believe the vocabulary of rights to be fundamentally incompatible with the vocabulary of virtue. But an equally important objection to Stout's position is a society that tried to make virtues and practices the foremost topic of public conversation would have to make it possible for everyone to take part in that conversation, whereas the social and economic inequalities tolerated by liberalism have the effect of depriving large classes of people of an effective public voice.

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