

Values, Virtues, and John Paul II

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Few words can rival "values" for popular appeal in the 1990s. Heightened awareness of the link between cultural problems and moral irresponsibility has spawned a nearly universal condemnation of the "war on values" being waged in American society. Politicians of every stripe and persuasion call for a return to traditional and family values as the surest solution to the nation's woes, from crime and drug abuse to poverty and illiteracy. There is, undoubtedly, a good deal of hype in this push for values. In the current cultural environment values sell, and those with a nose for success are quick to jump on the values bandwagon in the hope of reaping personal benefit. Yet along with this self-interested fringe of values vendors there exists a solid center of genuinely concerned Americans who have seen the bottom fall out of the public moral conscience in little more than a generation. This "solid center" constitutes the real reason for the popularity of values, which suggests that the issue will remain in the public eye for some time.

In the midst of this values boom, however, there is a growing trend among cultural conservatives to adopt a different tack in efforts to reestablish a sense of ethical responsibility in American society. According to this group, a necessary ingredient to end the "war on values" is precisely a war on the word itself. "Values," we are told in a bevy of recent books and articles, is an inherently vitiated term which itself embodies a relativistic ethic. The promotion of "values" to combat pervading moral relativism would thus propagate the problem its users seek to destroy.

This criticism often takes the form of a contrast between virtues and values, with the latter being the modern emasculated equivalent of the former. Gertrude Himmelfarb, in *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (1995), states that "it was not until the present century that morality became so thoroughly relativized that virtues ceased to be 'virtues' and became 'values.'" The change in vocabulary itself constitutes a revolution in thought. "'Values' brought with it the assumptions that all moral ideas are subjective and relative, that they are mere customs and conventions, that they have a purely instrumental, utilitarian purpose, and that they are peculiar to specific individuals and societies."

Professor Himmelfarb's analysis echoes that of the late Allan Bloom, who popularized the problem of values with his 1987 work, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom traces the origin of values to Friedrich Nietzsche, who preached the supremacy of the human will and its ability to create good and evil. Nietzsche, and Max Weber after him, sought to substitute subjective values for objective goods. For Nietzsche, writes Bloom, "we do not love a thing because it is good, it is good because we love it." Rebellious

against centuries of moral reasoning, Nietzsche proclaimed that goodness is not something objective that attracts the human will, but rather the creative will's projection of value on something else. Thus values are anchored not in objective reality, but in the subjective will. As Nietzsche understood it, Bloom continues, "men in our current decrepitude could take it easy if they believed God, nature, or history provides values."

As the disastrous consequences of our pervasive ethical relativism become more and more apparent, there is evidence of a growing frustration with values whose only claim to validity is personal preference and taste. Yet the road to recovery is still uncertain. In the face of the present crisis it seems there are two possible paths to take in our approach to values: either to abandon discourse on values in favor of more traditional ethical language, or to assert the objective foundation of values and hence a system by which they can be compared, evaluated, and judged.

The consensus seems to favor the abolition of "values." Nevertheless, a convincing argument can also be made for the second option. While discussion on virtues indeed must be vigorously reintroduced into the public forum, it doesn't necessarily follow that virtues must be promoted to the exclusion of values-as we can see if we examine the approach that Pope John Paul II has taken towards values.

Allan Bloom is thoroughgoing in his analysis of Nietzsche's philosophy of values, but the practical conclusion he draws is fatally flawed. The proposal to jettison "values" from philosophical and ethical lexicon reflects an erroneous understanding of the nature and role of words. All words run the risk of being manipulated, but they can also be redeemed. In culture wars, as in philosophical debate, words are often like towns along the battle front: they offer a strategic position and must be fought for and defended, and not relinquished as soon as the enemy advances. Along with "values," Bloom stigmatizes such words as "authenticity," "commitment," and "decision," all of which have thoroughly legitimate and worthwhile uses. These terms need to be rehabilitated and purified, not discarded-else every word claimed by a philosophical or psychological school would have to be declared unsuitable for meaningful discourse. By this logic we could no longer speak of freedom after Sartre, of tolerance after Voltaire, or of social justice after liberation theology.

Though Bloom brought to the fore suspicions about "values" terminology, doubts had been raised decades before the appearance of *The Closing of the American Mind*. In 1953 the philosopher Leo Strauss published *Natural Right and History*, in which he ably demonstrates the incoherence of Max Weber's fact-value distinction. Ten years later Strauss lamented the relativism ushered in by the social sciences and their methods in a paper on the behavioral sciences. This "new political or social science," says Strauss, rests on "sociological or psychological theories" that exclude an objective base. "By teaching the equality of all values, by denying that there are things which are intrinsically high and others which are intrinsically low as well as by denying that there is an essential difference between men and brutes, it unwittingly contributes to the victory of the gutter."

Strauss' analysis was remarkably accurate. Already in 1962 he correctly predicted where modern sociology was headed, and in his prognosis of the "victory of the gutter" as a consequence of moral relativism, he couldn't have been more exact. But one key difference between Strauss' position and Bloom's is that Strauss lays the blame for moral decline on "teaching the equality of all values," where Bloom stresses the corruptive effect of the term itself.

The moral relativism of the 1960s was exacerbated by the publication of *Values Clarification* in 1972 and the educational movement it engendered. The book by Sidney Simon, Leland Howe, and Howard Kirschenbaum, which has sold over 900,000 copies, is a veritable manual of relativistic ethics. Although acceptance of the program has waned in the last several years, its principles still hold sway in educational circles. As Paul Vitz has observed, "The name 'values clarification' is gone-but the same self-oriented moral relativism, under other names, continues to undermine the moral life of our children." The problem, in other words, goes deeper than the choice of terms: a virtue can be relativized just as easily as a value.

One might object that, in fact, modern society already understands "values" according to a relativistic model-especially since the birth of the values clarification movement-in a way it has not yet relativized "virtues." Yet we owe this understanding to the deliberate action of individuals who have energetically promoted their views on values, and not to an inherent problem with values themselves. And despite the efforts of these individuals, many still equate values with objective goods. This suggests that a proper response to the current situation is an equally energetic campaign for a more serious and objectively grounded understanding of values.

One might also object that we simply have no need for "values," since the word is fully replaceable by less ambiguous and more forceful synonyms, such as "virtues." But the two words are not synonyms. Virtue refers to a good habit, a habitual disposition of the will towards goodness. Value, on the other hand, is a quality of things that makes them desirable. Though values and virtues often intersect, values cannot be reduced to moral virtues. Values extend beyond moral virtues and comprise all goods for the person: biological, human, moral, and spiritual, according to a hierarchy rooted in human nature.

In his discourses and written messages Pope John Paul II often refers to values, as a single issue of the weekly Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* reveals. On January 25, 1996, the Pope addressed the mayor of Rome and made reference to the "great values of hospitality, tolerance, justice, and universality." On January 27, in a meeting with the regional board and council of Lazio, Italy, he urged his hearers to "adhere to the loftiest values of its tradition." On January 28, in a homily in the Roman parish of Pope St. Cletus, he stressed the need to deepen "the human and Christian values present in one's own life," and to order them "according to a proper hierarchy." On January 29, he spoke to the Brazilian bishops of "the fundamental values of respect for life and the family."

In *The De-Moralization of Society*, Gertrude Himmelfarb says that Nietzsche used "values" "consciously, repeatedly, indeed insistently" to bring about his purpose. The

same could be applied to John Paul, though his purpose is radically at odds with that of the German philosopher. Pope John Paul does not leave his understanding of values open to misinterpretation. In his many addresses and writings he takes care to define exactly what he means by values, specifying their relationship to unchanging and objective truth. In the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope expressed this relationship within the framework of the common good: "It is urgently necessary, for the future of society and the development of a sound democracy, to rediscover those essential and innate human and moral values which flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no individual, no majority, and no State can ever create, modify, or destroy, but must only acknowledge, respect, and promote."

Besides specifying the relation of human and moral values to the truth of the human person, John Paul also makes clear that in the final analysis, values are grounded in God Himself. In March 1985 the Pope wrote a letter to young people in which he stated, "Only God is the ultimate basis of all values; only He gives the definitive meaning to our human existence." He added that "in Him and Him alone all values have their first source and final completion. . . . Without Him-without the reference to God-the whole world of created values remains as it were suspended in an absolute vacuum."

Along with allusions to values throughout John Paul's writings, we find the term in other magisterial documents as well. Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which contains numerous references to values, especially in the context of marriage, the family, and Christian social doctrine. In the chapter on the human community, for example, we read: "Society is essential to the fulfillment of the human vocation. To attain this aim, respect must be accorded to the just hierarchy of values, which subordinates physical and instinctual dimensions to interior and spiritual ones."

Those who feel uncomfortable with John Paul's use of "values" have done their best to minimize or nullify its importance. Some have denied the fact outright, such as the Catholic League's well-intentioned ad in the October 2, 1995 edition of the *New York Times*, which stated that "they speak about values, you speak about virtues." While John Paul does speak abundantly about virtues, to say he doesn't speak of values is patently untrue.

Others have accused the Pope of superficiality, of not thinking through the consequences of what he is saying. This is apparent in Allan Bloom's remark: "After Hitler, everybody scurried back under the protective cover of morality, but practically no one turned to serious thought about good and evil. Otherwise our President, or the Pope, for that matter, would not be talking about values." But the insinuation that John Paul does not engage in "serious thought about good and evil" falls by its own weight. It is difficult, if not impossible, to come up with anyone who thinks more seriously about these topics than the present pontiff. His vigorous and cogent apology for the objectivity of the moral law has set the tone for Catholic moral theology for the close of this millennium and the birth of the next.

Others have seen in the Pope's continuous use of "values" an inadvertence, a mere oversight to which no weight should be given. Thus the term slips into his addresses and writings without his realizing it, as could any other word, and he doesn't really know what he is saying. The frequency of John Paul's references to values, however, renders this thesis improbable. Long before becoming pope, Karol Wojtyla wrote his doctoral thesis on Max Scheler's *Ethics of Values*. In his classic work, *The Acting Person*, Wojtyla examines the cognitive experience of values, which he equates with the apprehension of the good of a specific object, and the relation between knowledge of values and the will. Pope John Paul is indeed a philosopher *of values*. If he insists on speaking of values, it is clear that he does so deliberately, with a most precise meaning in mind.

A still more novel explanation for the Pope's use of "values" has been offered by Iain T. Benson of British Columbia, head of the Centre for Renewal in Public Policy (See "Against Values" in *First Things*, January 1996). According to Benson's theory, which succeeds in safeguarding John Paul's moral and philosophical credibility while maintaining the undesirability of "values," the Pope's apparent use of the word "values" is nothing more than an error in translation. Whereas the Latin speaks of "goods" (*bona*)-for example in the encyclicals *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae*- the English translation yields "values."

Unfortunately this hypothesis doesn't take into account the genesis of Pope John Paul's encyclicals. In drafting his encyclicals, the Pope first produces copious notes in Polish. These are subsequently translated into Italian and the Italian draft becomes his *instrumentum laboris*, to be worked on together with a team of experts. The approved Italian text is finally translated into many other languages, including Latin. The Latin is, therefore, the *official* version, but not the *original* version. Where the English reads "values" we find "*warto sci*" in the Polish edition (not *dobra*, goods) and "*valori*" in the Italian. The problem, then, is not the translation from Latin to English, but the translation from Italian to Latin.

To understand John Paul's attitude toward values-and toward modern culture in general, with its concrete concerns and characteristic preoccupations-it is necessary to understand the Pope's view of the human person and the Church's pressing task of the new evangelization.

Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, a document the Pope helped write, offers a description of the Catholic attitude towards the modern world as one of solidarity with the whole human family. The Council speaks of the Church's responsibility to read the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the gospel. "In language intelligible to every generation," we read, "she should be able to answer the ever-recurring questions which men ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other."

John Paul's style of preaching the gospel to contemporary society is indeed anything but defensive and is succinctly captured in his well-known saying, "Proclaim the truth and let error destroy itself." Keenly aware of his role as guardian of the deposit of faith, the

Pope is unabashedly "countercultural" when faithfulness to Christ requires it, but he does not look for confrontation as a matter of course. In Baltimore on October 8, 1995, Pope John Paul touched on this point in his homily: "Sometimes, witnessing to Christ will mean drawing out of a culture the full meaning of its noblest intentions, a fullness that is revealed in Christ. At other times, witnessing to Christ means challenging that culture, especially when the truth about the human person is under assault."

John Paul's approach does not compromise with "modernity," but is rather a modern yet unapologetic expression of the perennial teachings of the Church. James Hitchcock of St. Louis University writes, "The Pope has . . . committed the Church to a relationship with culture which is both modern and traditional in the best sense of each term." All this means, naturally, that our secular society finds John Paul disconcerting. It keeps running into walls in its attempt to make him fit into preestablished molds. The same difficulty is no doubt experienced by those Catholics accustomed to conceiving the Church and her ministers in terms of political categories: left, right, and center.

Debate on just how far to go in her dialogue with the world has been present in the Church since her foundation. Though of far smaller scale and import, the war on "values" is reminiscent of the heated dispute between the great apologists during the first centuries over Greek "inculturation." Some, such as Tertullian, Tatian, and Arnobius, were passionately opposed to Greek philosophy and culture in the fear that their influence would adulterate the gospel. Others, however, such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, endeavored to articulate the message of the gospel using Hellenistic terminology and philosophical concepts. By so doing they sought to facilitate the Greeks' acceptance and assimilation of Christianity, and the spread of Christianity itself. Fortunately Justin and Clement won out in the controversy, and the "baptism" of Greek philosophy enriched both philosophy and Christian expression as well. Similar disputes continue up to the present day. During the Second Vatican Council, for example, there was resistance to using the word "dignity" in the conciliar document on religious liberty, on the grounds that it smacked of secular humanism.

Time and time again Pope John Paul II has demonstrated his evangelical prudence. In his dialogue with the modern world he has maintained a careful balance between firmness and flexibility. His advancement of values-together with virtues-is in keeping with his larger program: the promotion of the integral good of the human person, culminating in salvation through the gospel.

"Democracy stands or falls with the truths and values which it embodies and promotes." These words formed the core of John Paul's address given at the farewell ceremony of October 8, 1995, which officially closed his visit to the United States. The Pope added, "But these values themselves must have an objective content. Otherwise they correspond only to the power of the majority, or the wishes of the most vocal." We ought to insist on this vital link between values and objective content. It is time to end the war on values, not by laying down our arms or abandoning the battlefield, but rather by fearlessly proclaiming and living out the truth.

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