

ties will continue to exhibit a power structure along with a hierarchy that uses that power. But if the power no longer has its ground in the sacred, how can the power continue to provide the ground for order in society? Will that power not be transformed into a source of disorder? Molnar's question then is this: How can the desacralized power that characterizes contemporary states continue to serve as the ordering principle of society? How can we prevent this desacralized power from bringing about disorder and anarchy?

We continue to believe that we are political and social animals. But, Molnar insists, we are also religious beings. In the history of our species, the religious and the political have never been separated—until now. This situation has helped produce a crisis that lies at the very center of our social being.

According to the contributors to Kirk's book, we must resist attempts to use the court to desacralize American society. According to Molnar, the way to do this is call Americans back to the recognition that ordered societies are required to operate under the aegis of Twin Powers. According to Rutler, it is a matter of utmost urgency that we recover the cognitive and the doctrinal, foundations of our historic faith.

—Reviewed by Ronald Nash

### ***The Erosion of Political Principles***

**Democracy and the Ethical Life: A  
Philosophy of Politics and Commu-  
nity**, by Claes G. Ryn, *Washington,  
D.C.: Catholic University of America  
Press, 1990. ix+245 pp. \$14.95.*

IN 1978, when Professor Claes G. Ryn's book first appeared, perceptive readers

were made acutely aware that his study was an important defense of American constitutional representative government, based upon the classical Greek and Roman and Judaeo-Christian legacy of Western civilization, as against the disastrous modern, populist, secular, and utopian theory of democracy which has developed in the world since the French Revolution. Ryn's excellent description and analysis of the vital distinctions between American democracy, following Madison, Hamilton and the Founding Fathers, and French Jacobin utopian democracy, the product of Rousseau's theories, was presented on the level of political theory. It did not include consideration of the actual historical state of contemporary American democracy in relation to the nation's general culture. Supplementing the four original sections of his book, this new paperback edition has a "Postscript" of almost forty additional pages on the present condition of American democracy, in practice and in theory.

Since democracy in some form is the reigning fashion of most twentieth-century nations, today practically everyone favors "democracy" as an abstract concept. But few persons seem able to distinguish between the theories of constitutional popular governments with limited powers and totalitarian regimes which call themselves "democratic" republics. It is essential for Americans in particular not to lump together indiscriminately all governments which call themselves "democratic," but to discriminate between their form of constitutional representative government and competing forms which corrupt it or seek to replace it. It is good, then, to have available once more Ryn's brilliant defense of our constitutional system of government, together with his warning of the dangers which assail it both internally and externally. Ryn's study provides its readers with the strengths and normative politi-

cal principles inherent in American democracy, and also with the essential intellectual tools necessary to detect the political, economic, social, and cultural forces in the nation that work to emasculate the justice, liberty, and good order of American society.

In Part One, "Democracy as an Ethico-Philosophical Problem," Ryn describes democracy not merely as a form of government, but as a total way of life which includes the practical personal and corporate affairs of individuals and institutions throughout civil society. He observes that the great problem in a democratic society is how to reconcile the conflicts between traditional moral principles and the abuse of freedom which derives from self-interest carried to selfishness. Since political democracy provides conditions of extensive social liberty, its very virtue as a free society can be turned into a vice by individuals and groups who convert the instrumental means of freedom into their selfish ends. Ryn believes that the true ends of society must be consistent with the ethical and spiritual principles in the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions of Western civilization. When democratic government allows its liberty to degenerate through permissiveness into tolerating criminal behavior and cultural anarchy, it creates a serious moral predicament for those citizens whose ethical principles are rooted in religious traditions and in a morally based community life.

A complicating factor is modern man's unbounded faith and absolute confidence in experimental and applied science as the instrumental means of mastering physical nature and converting it to the practical needs of social life. Faith in science and the experimental methods of science in dealing with all phenomena is so all-pervasive that frequently no distinction is made between the applicability of science to external physical nature and human nature and society. To apply

science to man presupposes that human nature is purely physiological, that matter is the only reality, and that the needs of man are purely economic or materialistic. Thus through excessive faith in science, and its indiscriminate application to human affairs, modern man tends to deny the very existence of spirit in human nature.

All of the traditional traits of moral and aesthetic character derived from religion and the arts are neglected in favor of material ends. Free will, the creative imagination of the artist, and the moral principles that transcend physical reality from a divine origin come to be rejected as non-existent, or treated as irrelevant. The result is disastrous to the cultural life of the nation. As science degenerates into "scientism," it replaces religion as a standard for moral truth, even though science cannot provide us with normative ethical principles. A scientific metaphysics of matter as the only reality sooner or later becomes an end in itself, and human nature is then treated as raw material for experiments. But even when science is perceived as a means to human social ends, its determinism tends to undercut all responsibility for negative or even criminal behavior. By disregarding the moral norms of religion and the spiritual end of man, modern science and a secularized democracy create a society in which the good life comes to be identified with mere creature comforts, and material security becomes the primary objective of many people. Hence, the more that science replaces religion in a democracy the more it adds to the moral dilemma of its traditional community life.

Part Two of Ryn's study deals with the duality of human nature in relation to the ethics of community life and culture. Like Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century and Christopher Dawson in our era, Ryn finds the basis of Western man's ethical life in community in the classical moral

philosophy of Plato and Aristotle as refined by the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition. Human nature is perceived as a duality of both spirit and matter. Man functions within a cosmic metaphysical order of reality consisting of two distinct but closely related elements, a fusion of the spiritual and the material—one transcendent and infinite, the other immanent and finite. The metaphysical duality makes human nature simultaneously involved in the spiritual and material spheres of reality. Man is a creature of two worlds— Saint Augustine's "City of God" and "City of Man." Within human nature this dualism involves a higher and lower moral self; the unity of both together forms the whole person. When the spiritual and the material elements are separated and made into absolutes, the result is asceticism or epicureanism. Ethics consists of the dynamic interplay between the moral intuition and conscience that exercises the higher will in each person, to put a check upon the arbitrary impulses and self-indulgent passions that seek pleasure without regard to moral restraints. In a democratic society which allows the maximum social liberty to its citizens there is much greater need for inner control through self-discipline, than in a society which imposes greater external control over individuals.

Parts Three and Four of Ryn's book consist of a detailed contrast between Rousseau's theory of democracy, centered in a unicameral legislature and the sovereignty of "the general will," as opposed to the American federal-state system, and its divided powers of government, subordinating popular sovereignty to moral and constitutional law. Ryn's excellent exposition makes crystal clear the moral and political deficiency of Rousseau's conception of democracy. Rousseau's theory violated the Aristotelian and Christian view of man as by nature a social animal, united through

his institutions in community, and functioning wholly within the known facts and experience of history. Like Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau ignored history (except to condemn it as a source of human corruption), and posited a pre-civil, primitive, fictional "state of nature" for the origins of society. He argued that since men voluntarily created civil society, it was not a "natural" condition but an "artificial" construct, and therefore the relationship of each man to society was also voluntaristic and revocable at will.

Rousseau solved the problem of social anarchy created by his conception of man and society through his doctrine of "the general will." This doctrine presupposed that a presumed social consensus of "the people," conceived as numbers, gave unrestricted power to the state and sanctioned its absolute will in determining all matters. Rousseau's theory of democracy was put into practice by the Jacobins during the French Revolution. As J. L. Talmon has shown, in *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952), the rule of the National Assembly under the Jacobins began with the social anarchy of Rousseau's pre-civil "natural rights" and ended in the political despotism of "the general will" as interpreted by Napoleon. Ryn notes that "Rousseau is at the same time a radical individualist, who wants to 'liberate' the individual from particular associations, and a radical collectivist, one who makes the most comprehensive political whole into the only arena for virtuous human striving." Rousseau regarded the general will as incompatible with the restraints of moral natural law and constitutional law, both of which were nullified in practice by the Jacobins.

Probably most intelligent Americans understand the wisdom in the theory of divided and balanced powers in the state as being very necessary to prevent political tyranny, so that it is easy for them to

accept Ryn's demonstrated superiority of American constitutional democracy over the French Jacobin plebiscitary model. But Rousseau's philosophy is not limited to political theory and practice, and his conception of the moral nature of man, which is more important than his political theory, has had far-reaching consequences in American society.

In *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), Burke noted that "Rousseau is a moralist or he is nothing." What kind of morality did he teach? According to Burke, Rousseau preached "the ethics of vanity," centered in the human ego and based on the assumption that man is by nature morally good. He made "sensibility," the self-conscious, spontaneous feelings or instincts of the moment, the sole source, test, and end of morality. Rousseau's system of ethics had nothing in it of restraint upon the passions. In brief, his moral theory was the total antithesis of "true humility, the basis of the Christian system." This meant that the ethical imperatives of the Ten Commandments, embodied in the religious and legal codes of Europe, were rejected or subordinated to individual egocentric vanity, "a selfish, flattering, seductive, ostentatious vice." Burke charged that through his "powerful rhetoric," expressed as "universal benevolence," Rousseau "attempted in France a regeneration of the moral constitution of man."

Burke believed that no moral problem was ever an abstract theoretical subject but was always embodied in a concrete human set of specific circumstances. Transcendent moral principles were immanent in the empirical and historical situations of men in civil society. Burke's historicism is value-centered because it combines his providential view of history as "the known march of the ordinary providence of God" with concrete empirical facts. In Christianity the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ, the perfect

union of the Divine and the human, provided the archetypal model for Burke's conviction that moral law is always combined with concrete historical circumstances, so that solutions to moral problems required both moral principles and a consideration of circumstances, perceived by "right reason" and an exercise of the higher will. Burke's Christian ethics, combined with his corporate view of man, meant that there is far more to being a citizen than getting and spending and laying waste one's powers in acquiring material possessions and wealth, or in pursuing pleasures. Social life in the community, as understood by Burke, presupposed an ethics beyond the self-indulgent individualism of Rousseau, an active life in the religious, intellectual, aesthetic, economic, and moral life of the community, subsuming the ego and vanity of individuals to moral purposes. Since Rousseau's moral theory of man and atomistic conception of society explained all evil as coming not from human weaknesses but from the institutions of society, Burke believed that it preached abstract theoretical virtue, but sanctioned practical vice. He noted that Rousseau expressed "benevolence to the whole species," but revealed a "want of feeling for individuals."

All that Burke said about Rousseau has great bearing upon the new additional section of Ryn's book, particularly the concluding chapter, which is a "diagnosis of the state of democracy" in America. Although Ryn does not mention Burke in his "Postscript," his inventory of the serious ills that afflict American society is in effect an extension of Burke's criticism of Rousseau's moral theory, applied to every aspect of American culture. This is not to say that Rousseau is the main cause of what ails American society, since the causes are multiple and reach back in history even before Rousseau.

Ryn is aware that the structure of

American constitutional democracy may be preserved while the spirit and epicurean values of plebiscitary democracy may prevail in the culture of the nation, and weaken or destroy the private and public virtues in the constitutional system. In the long run the culture of America is probably more important than its form of government, because it is the unwritten constitution of the nation, and permeates every aspect of the daily social life of the people. Ryn notes that "there are many signs" that the "ethical, intellectual and cultural foundations" of American constitutional democracy are eroding. Ryn also notes that through the nation's corrupted culture, "more and more, American politics exhibits the patterns and preferences of plebiscitary democracy," so that "American constitutionalism is being transformed into something far removed from the hopes and expectations of the framers of the Constitution." If enough Americans become sufficiently aware of the dangers that threaten their constitutional democracy, and have the moral courage to resist the powers of social disintegration, it is possible that good leadership can yet salvage what remains of their inheritance, and restore the nation to the high level of civility envisioned by the founding fathers of the American republic.

—Reviewed by Peter J. Stanlis