



Introduction to Special Forum on “Politics and Virtue”

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The papers collected in this forum were to be presented, along with other several other papers, at a workshop at Concordia University organized by Katharina Nieswandt and Tristan Rogers in March 2020. Sadly, the workshop was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I am grateful to Katharina and Tristan for organizing what promised to be an outstanding workshop and pleased to be able to publish a selection of the fine papers that were to be presented there.

The first paper, “Equality of Authority as the Aristotelian Common Good” by Mark LeBar, offers an updated account of the virtue of justice in its relation to individual flourishing and the common good. On LeBar’s view, Aristotle wrongly focused on the distribution of goods of fortune as the central concern of the special virtue of justice. For LeBar, the central issue of the virtue of justice is the distribution of normative authority. When I fail to repay a debt that has come due, I mistreat the creditor by failing to respect his normative authority. The norms that regulate the just distribution of normative authority emerge, on LeBar’s account, from the bottom up, through dyadic relations in which we make claims on each other. The structure of these negotiations favors the eventual emergence of equality of normative authority. The norms that emerge from these dyadic negotiations percolate outward to a broader moral community and define a common good for the people whose interactions are regulated by them. In addition to facilitating our ability to achieve individual goods without interference from others and perhaps with their aid, justice in LeBar’s sense fulfills distinctive normative interests that we have: interests in exerting control over the networks of obligations in which we are enmeshed. LeBar’s account of justice as a virtue emphasizes social norms rather than laws, which Aristotle emphasized, and the bottom-up creation of those norms rather than top-down governance. Hence it is a conception of justice that advisedly leaves little room for politics understood as tied to government and statecraft.

The second paper by Tristan Rogers, “A Virtue Politics for Liberal Democracy” argues that the seeming gulf between virtue ethics and liberal politics can be bridged, filling some lacunae on the part of both approaches. According to Rogers, social morality is crucial to human flourishing, and social morality requires coercive

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institutions. But not just any sort of state will suffice to this end: the state must not promote wickedness in its citizens. In fact, for Rogers, the state and its citizenry must interact virtuously as a condition of political legitimacy. But can virtue ethics embrace a genuinely liberal state, given that these states allow for a diversity of conceptions of the good life? It can, according to Rogers, because it acknowledges social embeddedness, according to which practical wisdom would generate different, but equally good directives according to different social circumstances. A virtue-based approach does not require that citizens share a substantive conception of the good life, but rather, citizens of a liberal democracy must share a substantive sense of social membership that allows for disagreement within a context of a commitment to the political community. The members of a political community with a sense of shared membership constitute a society with a common good that is a matter of friendship, which is itself a virtue alongside justice, on Rogers' account. Such a liberal democracy can play a formative role in addition to a constraining role, in supporting the achievement of practical wisdom by its citizens. Hence, on Rogers' account, a virtue ethical account of a just liberal democracy is not only possible, but also makes good some deficiencies in accounts of liberal justice that focus on rights to the neglect of the good life.

With Lisa Tessman's paper, "The Virtues of Reactive Attitudes" we turn to the issue of virtues related to holding each other responsible. Tessman takes up the issue of 'reactive attitudes' from P.F. Strawson's famous paper "Freedom and Resentment." These are attitudes that participants in interpersonal relationships exhibit towards themselves and each other as participants, including resentment, indignation, guilt and pride. Noting that our reactive attitudes are expressions of what we value, Tessman raises the question of what virtues might apply to these attitudes. Virtues that relate to interpersonal reactive attitudes require us to reflect or contribute to the shared construction of values, and I exhibit a vice of such attitudes when I hold someone responsible for things that matter only to me. If I resent my neighbor for not shoveling snow from my driveway, this is generally a bad reason because there is no shared expectation that my neighbor should do this. Hence, the virtues of interpersonal reactive attitudes require me to be attentive to what can reasonably be shared, and as Tessman points out, this connects virtues of this sort with the contractualist tradition.

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