

## Book Reviews

### Gentlemanly Pursuits

THE PURSUIT OF VIRTUE AND OTHER TORY NOTIONS. *By George F. Will.* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982) \$16.50.  
THE GENTLEMAN IN TROLLOPE: INDIVIDUALITY AND MORAL CONDUCT. *By Shirley Letwin.* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982) \$20.00.

There is a certain affinity between these two books. Shirley Letwin addresses herself to the code of the gentleman in nineteenth-century England, using Trollope's novels as her prime source of study and insight. She is highly respectful of this code of morality and manners. "I myself have come to think that the morality of a gentleman offers a more complete and coherent understanding of the human condition than any other known to me." The gentleman, in distinction from the aristocrat, was thought by many to be peculiar to England, the rise from class to class virtually unknown on the continent. In his attitudes toward religion, morals, politics, women, family, recreation, and education, the English gentleman was a distinct social type in the Victorian world and after.

It is evident from both his newspaper columns and his regular appearances as an analyst on television news shows that George Will thinks highly of the Tory gentleman's code, and manifestly this code is his touchstone in the work of separating the good from the bad, the noble from the vulgar, and the enduring from the meretricious. He is by his own admission Tory, tracing his intellectual lineage back to Burke, Newman, and Disraeli. Shirley Letwin remarks upon these three minds as exemplars of her code. Burke said that everything great in English civilization "depended for ages upon two principles—the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion." Disraeli was emphatic that only gentlemen should rule in government, and Newman's classic on the university might well be described as a prescription for a gentleman's proper education. Without doubt it is the absence of the gentleman from so many of the corridors of power and of affluence in our age that troubles George Will the most, though he wastes little time in lament, for, as Shirley Letwin puts the matter, the gentleman, "however uncongenial he may find his neighbors or his fortune... will always be thoroughly at home in the human world because he can enjoy its absurdities and has no ambition to overleap mortality." Mr. Will does not profess to understand other writers' use of typewriters instead of fountain pens in their crafting of sentences nor the penchant of most Americans for the latest in automobiles instead of 1969 Oldsmobiles, but he maintains his cheer and refrains from outright indignation.

George Will's book is a compilation of just under a hundred and fifty of his columns which have appeared during the last five years in 360

newspapers and in *Newsweek*. By his own accounting in the table of contents, they deal with conservatism, human rights and wrongs, life and death, totalitarianism, politics and the art of government, private and public lives, prejudices, and the microcosm of the world that is Mr. Will's own family. The book sparkles with insight, wit, and apposite quotations one doesn't ordinarily expect to see in a column.

Mr. Will doesn't try to hide the likes and dislikes which spring from the code of manners and morality by which he lives and thinks. He likes the family as an institution and respects religion in most of its manifestations, even though he appears to be secular minded himself; religion for Mr. Will is the indispensable vessel of the morality that separates man from the brutes. His respect for civility is high, and some of his more lacerating columns deal with those in politics and business who commit egregious breaches of this civility. He honors tradition, though not blindly or indiscriminately, and he has an abiding interest in the social bond and in its inherent fragility. He scorns egalitarianism not only for its intrinsic violation of the natural differentiation among human beings but for the shocking inequalities which are brought about by bureaucratic attempts to achieve it on a mass scale. He cherishes liberty, which, along with Burke, he sees possible only in the contexts of individual and social restraint. He does not like the consequences of libertarian use and abuse of the First Amendment. Finally, Mr. Will has a profound feeling for the nation, its proper governance and its necessary protection from enemies inside and outside the country.

George Will's general dislikes may be inferred from the foregoing, but there are certain animadversions of a more concrete kind which should be mentioned. One of them is abortion, though not, I gather, absolutely. What he finds appalling is the veritable plague of abortions that was brought about by a majority decision of the Supreme Court in 1973, in the historic *Roe v. Wade* case. At a single stroke the Court wiped out the customs, conventions, and laws of all fifty states. For decades, centuries indeed, these had limited the incidence of abortion. Abortion lay in a kind of twilight zone of morality in America. Few Americans actually approved of it, but its immorality lay in a chain or scale of other immoralities which included conception caused by rape or incest, birth outside wedlock, and so on. History, Hegel's cunning of reason, often disposes of moral issues or at very least keeps them within civil boundaries. But any such possibility was destroyed when the Court wiped out all localism, all custom, all expediency (in Burke's sense of the word), substituting national centralization of a single ethic regarding abortion—the ethic of free, unqualified abortion. The result might have been foreseen: the destruction of the twilight zone and the creation of two increasingly absolutist armies of righteousness, the Pro-Lifers and the Pro-Abortionists, the latter including a rising number who flaunt abortion as the symbol of woman's escape from the "tyranny" of motherhood within the family. As Mr. Will observes, not since the Dred Scott decision on slavery in the territories in 1857 has a Court decision polarized so drastically the American people.

Judicial activism in general offends Mr. Will's sense of the proper constitutional separation of powers. Such imperialism cannot be blamed

entirely on the judiciary, for all too often Congress, cravenly, leaves to federal judicial action matters which are felt too hot to touch. Judges at the federal level do not have to run for office, enjoy life tenure of office, and cannot be removed save for egregious, impeachable offense. The result is a federal judiciary in our time, as Mr. Will points out, engaged in the running of school districts, prisons, and assorted other public enterprises once thought to be subject to democratic, that is, voter, control, whether directly or indirectly. Mr. Will might have likened today's federal judge to Jeremy Bentham's omnipotent and omniscient Magistrate—centerpiece of a utopianism as rationalist as it was repellent, one that banned everything electoral, starting with Parliament, and everything in any measure traditional, and that saw human redemption in the hands of a sole, all-powerful, unchallengeable Magistrate. Our federal judges haven't acquired Benthamite power yet, but the Ice Age is young, and they have come a long way. If there is anything in contemporary practice in government that would absolutely astound the Framers, it is the number and the virtually sovereign powers of federal judges who wield power that Burke would regard just as "arbitrary" as that which he found in the British government that brought on the war with the American colonists. The sometimes wanton intrusion of the federal judiciary into areas traditionally governed by the people through their elected representatives, on school boards, city councils, state legislatures, all the way up to Congress, represents one of the two great depressants of representative democracy in our age, the other being, of course, the federal bureaucracy.

Liberalism, in its Galbraithian form, is another easily discernible prejudice in Mr. Will's view of the world, for which we may also honor him. He correctly sees the double-headed nature of contemporary liberalism: on the one hand ready to endorse any and all uses of the First Amendment, even those where "free speech" manifests itself in degrees of pornographic horror rarely if ever permitted in public before our time; on the other, ready, nay, eager, to invade through the bureaucracy almost every area of genuine and vital liberty—family, local community, school, property, and so on. Contemporary liberalism has become a composite of Mill's "one very simple principle" (but without Mill's immediate qualifications) and the liberalism of the French Enlightenment, overwhelmingly committed to *étatisme*.

Finally, deeply sensitive to the world crisis that the rise to superpower status of the Soviet Union has brought with it, Mr. Will is generally hostile to the policy of detente and, needless to say, to nuclear freeze groups and other peaceniks who demonstrate weekly at rallies, flaunting their utter indifference to the Soviet Union and its mission of stalking the world—so far as American deterrent power permits—in the interest of Muscovite primitivism and Marxist-Leninist proselytization. Our antiweapons enthusiasts talk of bilateralism in their purported quest for peace, but, as Mr. Will suggests, they clearly think unilaterally. That is, let the aggressive militaristic United States disarm first, and the gentle folk of the Kremlin will be only too happy to follow.

Such a balance sheet of judgments as I have drawn up briefly from George Will's volume is not likely to distress many readers of this jour-

nal. There are reflections, though, here and there, which will, if not actually distress, provoke. My sense is that Mr. Will has been moving fairly steadily in recent years to an increasingly nationalist conservatism, one in which a larger role of government in moral as well as economic and social affairs is held up as a necessary check upon the tides of anarchy, which at times seem formidable to our social order. I don't for a moment imply that Mr. Will is any closer to Galbraithian liberalism in this respect than he has ever been. He is no liberal, thank heaven, and on his side is the fact that conservatism, especially in its English Tory manifestations, has not seldom seen fit to carry government into the marketplace for purposes of either humanity or order. No one loved the English nation in its historically formed entirety more than did Edmund Burke, whose indictments of French Revolutionary *étatisme* form the seed bed of modern European conservatism. In perhaps the most celebrated single passage in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the proposition is laid down that while society is indeed a contract, "the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, callico or tobacco or some other low concern. . . . It is a partnership in all science: a partnership in all art: a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection."

It is this incontestably Burkean temper that appears to have overridden in some measure Mr. Will's earlier—and also Burkean—distrust of *étatisme*, the kind seen in our appalling army of bureaucrats who, paraphrasing Burke, deal with our society "like a country of conquest." Thus Mr. Will ruminates in some melancholy on the fact that under the influence of the modern market-obsessed mentality, government dares "to concern itself with soybeans but not virtue." In a column written after this book went to press, he complains that "conservatives worry too little about the commercial dynamism they nurture." Moreover "too many conservatives have a crabbed and dispiriting attitude toward central government," and Mr. Will calls for a Burke or Daniel Webster, someone to speak of the nation with the soul of a poet rather than a corporate controller. He is almost contemptuous of Adam Smith, an attitude that would trouble Mr. Will's mentor Burke a great deal. The correspondence between Burke and Smith—who were intimate friends as well as mutual admirers—makes very clear indeed Burke's admiration for, and intellectual congeniality with, *The Wealth of Nations*. Mr. Will argues that Adam Smith is to a substantial degree responsible for the "sharp distinction between society and government, and the seeds of hostility toward government." But he is too much the political scholar as well as analyst and critic not to be able to recall that that distinction is very deep in Western social thought, especially from the High Middle Ages onward. Bodin, Althusius, Locke—but not Hobbes and Rousseau—are among those who also make a distinction between society and government or state binding.

The problem of government today, Mr. Will writes, is "not so much that government is 'too big' as that government is considered a low and hostile thing." Almost every poll reveals the truth of the latter; but hasn't there been a fairly direct ratio during the last half-century between the development of the two—large government and disliked gov-

ernment? Familiarity doesn't breed contempt; familiarity *is* contempt. And no one can reasonably doubt that government and citizenry have become almost obscenely familiar in our century, thus eroding the possibility of mutual respect. What Lamennais wrote of the ancient Roman Empire is apposite to the United States today: apoplexy at the center, anemia at the extremities. No one wants a national government that is indifferent to virtue—though heaven knows, the record suggests that willy-nilly we have come close to achieving that during the last fifty years—but no one of decent regard for the natural differentiation and pluralism of life wants either a government that thinks of nothing else but virtue. The lamentable fact is that political prescriptions which begin with Plato or Rousseau always, in practice at least, end up with the bureaucrat and policeman.

I have no worries of George Will, were he to become our Burke or Disraeli in these troubled times, winding up as Grand Inquisitor, and I have no doubt that at greater length than his lapidary columns permit, he could provide thoughtful answers to the questions I am raising. He believes that we have an "impoverished sense of politics" and he proposes, in effect, that government devote at least as much concern to virtue as to soybeans. But which arm of our national government should be politically force-fed and entrusted with responsibility for our virtue? I don't have the sense that the Supreme Court, as we have come to know it, is high on Mr. Will's list for this responsibility, and I would be mildly thunderstruck if he looked to either Capitol Hill or the White House. Some national commission? Highly unlikely. We need merely remember the Commission on National Purpose, or, for that matter, any other national commission. However, these reviewer's cud-chewings are no more than that. On the record of this profound as well as brilliant volume, no one has higher claim than George Will to the title Moral Philosopher Extraordinary of the United States—a kind of fourth branch of government.

The gentleman, as we learn in rich and engrossing detail from Shirley Letwin, was very mindful indeed of virtue, though he generally tended to believe that it, like Christianity generally, was not something to be brought too often into the marketplace. The true gentleman—and part of the author's boldness of argument is her contention that no real analogue of the English gentleman was to be found on the continent—lived by a code, largely Christian in foundation, though not to overlook feudal roots, and it could not often be said that he honored the code more in the breach than in the observance. The code was part of his being; it was the veritable tissue of Parliament, Whitehall, the university, the established church, and, far from least, the social club. To be a gentleman and to know one was, freed the mind nicely from preoccupation with such matters as mere merit. Obviously it was a true gentleman in England who, upon being elevated by the monarch to some hoary order, said that the nicest part of it was that there was no damned nonsense about merit.

But public pronouncement, much less homiletic, on such matters as virtue or piety was rare among gentlemen. Taste, yes, but not virtue. Too close an association with one or other virtue in public opened one

to the charge of enthusiasm. The English lady who said that, as far as she was concerned, people could do whatever they wanted in the streets, so long as it didn't scare the horses, spoke like a gentleman as well as gentlelady. As Mrs. Letwin shows in rich and savory detail, the English gentleman, as revealed to us in Trollope's many pages, tended to see politics as a kind of game, a serious and important game, of course, but one to be governed by the usual boundaries and restraints which lie in game-rules, not, certainly, by rushes of moral enthusiasm. If there is one thing I miss in her book it is a sufficient attention to the loathing of enthusiasm in the English gentleman's mind—religious and political alike. The history of modern politics teaches us that enthusiasm is an indispensable requirement of all efforts to instill someone's conception of virtue in the public mind through law or constitutional amendment.

Trollope's own envisagement of morals-cum-politics is deliciously given parable by his account of a political program for euthanasia in the novel *The Fixed Period*. Under this idealistically conceived program, all citizens reaching sixty-seven would be "deposited" for a year in honorable seclusion in a "college" and then put painlessly to death. In this way, people would be spared the "slipperd selfishness" and the "senile weakness" which now tend to fray the social fabric. If men learned death, said the moral providers behind this novel legislation, they would have greater love for "the life of humanity." Naturally, these providers never use the word "death." It is always "mode of transition." No English gentleman of Trollope's age would have needed to be told that the whole episode of the preposterous Mr. Neverbend and his solution to the problem of old age in society was a delicious paradigm for the humanitarian enthusiasms which rolled like snowballs over the political and moral landscape in the late nineteenth century, growing almost exponentially under the ministrations of those whose highest commandment was the principle of A and B getting together to decide what C should do for X—C being, of course, William Graham Sumner's truly forgotten man. Thus the ever-fertile, rational, and humanitarian mind of Mr. Neverbend and his solution to the problem of old age and death may be seen as Trollope's comment upon the idiot enthusiasms of his day. Once, it is pointed out to Mr. Neverbend that the man who is to be painlessly put to death at the required age is still far richer in his strengths and capacities than is the young man who is to inherit the large estate. Shouldn't, then, an exception be made? Mr. Neverbend's indignation is delightful:

'What, the whole system was to be made to suit itself to the peculiarities of one individual constitution'? Only someone who could see 'nothing of the general beauty of the Fixed Period' could raise such an irrational objection. The Fixed Period had been chosen with reference to the community at large. It was founded on an undeniable philosophical truth and had been translated meticulously into a practical scheme which would make humanity 'prosper and be strong, and thrive, unpolluted by the greed and cowardice of a second childhood'. Anyone who could see reason, whatever his personal condition, would say happily when his time came: 'Lead me into the College and there let me prepare myself for that brighter life which will require no mortal strength'.



There are many salubrious guides we acquire from the code of the gentleman in Shirley Letwin's fascinating book. She has mined Trollope with scrupulous but generous disposition. Our Victorian forefathers, Liberal and Tory alike, were far from unmindful of the relation that must exist between government and morality. Most of them thought, however, as did the Framers of the American constitution, that virtue is overwhelmingly within the domain of family, church, and community, and that while a great statesman such as Washington and Lincoln can occasionally raise the level of morality in the nation, this comes not from conscious pursuit of virtue but from skillful steering of the ship of state.

*Robert Nisbet*

## Reaganomics Before and After

**TOMORROW, CAPITALISM.** By *Henri Lepage*. (Open Court, LaSalle and London, 1982) \$14.95.

**TAX REVOLT.** By *Alvin Rabuska and Pauline Ryan*. (Hoover Institution, Stanford, California, 1982) \$16.95.

**GREED IS NOT ENOUGH.** By *Robert Lekachman*. (Pantheon, New York, 1982) \$13.50.

**HOW TO END THE MONETARIST CONTROVERSY. A JOURNALIST'S REFLECTIONS ON OUTPUT, JOBS, PRICES, AND MONEY.** By *Samuel Brittan*. (Institute for Economic Affairs, London, 1982) \$1.50.

While browsing through the London School of Economics bookshop one day in 1976, I was struck by the number of recently published books and monographs which appeared to blame Britain's economic problems on excessive taxation, regulation, and public sector mismanagement generally. It seemed from the titles on the bookshelf that, during my two years' absence from Britain, there had been a dramatic change in both academic and popular thinking about economic issues. With the advantage of hindsight, it is now easy to view those books and monographs as precursors of the intellectual and attitudinal changes which would subsequently help to elect a new and radical Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher in 1979.

If some future historian ever searches for similar background material with which to understand the conservative swing in American politics that became apparent during the late 1970s and culminated in Ronald Reagan's 1980 election victory, he will find it in *Tomorrow, Capitalism* by Henri Lepage and *Tax Revolt* by Alvin Rabuska and Pauline Ryan.

Henri Lepage is a French journalist who came to the United States during the mid-1970s in order to investigate what he calls "the new economics." *Tomorrow, Capitalism*, which was originally published in