

TowerTalks Transcript

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The Flourishing Society

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So what does it mean to have a flourishing society? Well, in one sense, it's pretty straightforward. It means having society where our institutions, norms, and practices all make for our well-being, both individually and collectively. Societies marked by severe poverty, violence, or social and political oppression, are very much not flourishing, precisely because some, or all, have little to no possibility of having their lives go well. Beyond that, though, things get pretty contentious, for not only do we disagree about what substantively constitutes individual human flourishing, we also disagree what the role of the state and other parts of the society should play in that flourishing.

Indeed, I would say that our most controversial social and political issues hinge precisely on this: What does it mean to live well, as a human being, and what does the social and political order have to do with that living well?

The classical answer to these questions says there's a relatively singular view of human flourishing, and the political community has the primary responsibility for cultivating it. The third century B.C. philosopher, Aristotle, probably best exemplifies this understanding. He argues that human beings, by nature, have a certain excellence for which we inherently strive, characterized chiefly by a cohesive set of moral and intellectual virtues that at least some of us can come to inhabit fully. We're only able to grasp and exercise these virtues, though, to the degree that we've been trained, that it's habituated to do so.

We can only become reliably courageous, for example, if we've already had the experience of being made to be courageous, and it's politics, Aristotle argues, that the polis, the political community, has, in fact, ultimate responsibility not just for securing basic material goods that anyone needs to live, but also for the cultivation of those virtues. Politics, here, is architectonic--it has a responsibility and authority to arrange and direct all of the community's other social systems, economic life, family life, education, and so on, so they all work together to make our flourishing possible.

We should, I think, recognize the attractions of this model, if for no other reason than it helps us to consider the sorts of virtues and vices, human excellences and depravities, that our society, our polity, habituates us into. But I think the monist view has, this particular monist view, has any number of problems.

First, at least in its ancient form, it tends to suppose that only a relatively small number of people can actually do what's required for flourishing, and relatedly, that the rest should be subordinated to make that flourishing possible. That is to say, ancient monism is indelibly hierarchical. Aristotle's defense of slavery and subordination of women is necessary, in this sense, because he thinks he needs them to provide those at the top their basic material goods so they can work on becoming virtuous. Economic life, the life of working, trading, and commerce, on this account, has little to do with the cultivation of virtue, and so Aristotle suggests, a) that it's the realm of those who cannot, by nature, achieve full flourishing, and b) that those who do the hard work of producing and trading for the stuff we need are merely there to support a virtuous elite.

Second, classical monism underestimates the scope of choices free persons inevitably make with how they understand their own flourishing. It turns out that people under conditions of freedom come to an astonishing range of answers about what constitutes a good life. This means that in order to prevent the sort of pluralism we see in free societies around the world, politics would necessarily have to be pretty coercive, and even repressive, to keep

things in check. Now, for some, this might be a price worth paying, but a bureaucracy committed to the promotion of virtue and the suppression of vice has all kinds of problems.

Finally as Augustine pointed out, it's hardly the case that virtue on its own, however well-developed, can suffice for our flourishing. We can fully inhabit a complete set of human virtues, and yet still have our lives go very poorly. As the psalmist laments repeatedly, the wicked are all too successful, and the good endure too much suffering, even in the best sort of politics. The classical monists are simply too optimistic about the possibilities of politically cultivated flourishing, underestimate our reasonable disagreements about it, and are all too willing to sacrifice some people's well-being for the sake of others.

Now, in some respects, modern liberalism, the social and political order that we inhabit, that emphasizes individual liberties, limited government, constitutionalism, and the like, is an attempt to respond to these problems. Unlike the classical monist view, it declaims direct responsibility for individuals flourishing. It sometimes even suggest there might not be a single model of human excellence, but instead, a variety of them. Thus it says the state should try and remain agnostic, with respect to what constitutes human flourishing, and look merely to protect or secure the set of goods that most anyone would need, as John Stuart Mill would put it, to pursue their own good their own way.

A flourishing society, on this account, is little more than a collection of individuals, who are capable, both morally and materially, of choosing and revising their understanding of the good life. Liberal orders understand themselves to be much more accommodating of pluralism and individuality, than their competitors, precisely in their tendency to not take a view on how people choose to live their lives. The hope and the expectation is that by avoiding the controversies of what it means for human beings to live well, liberal orders will be more stable, just, and free, and enable all the opportunity to flourish in their own distinctive ways.

In one sense, this has proven to be quite successful. Liberal orders contained within them, perhaps a wider diversity of lives than most historically thought compatible, with any kind of social stability. It's easy to take the freedom and relative social peace we do enjoy for granted, but living in societies in which we're able to worship according to conscience, express freely what we believe, and largely order our lives as we see fit, is a remarkable thing, and one not to be disparaged lightly. But there are some tendencies within liberalism that should make us worry.

The economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton are among a number of social scientists who've documented what they call the rising deaths of despair in the United States, increased mortality rates for middle-aged Americans due to suicide, drug, and alcohol abuse. There are, no doubt, a range of causes for this phenomena, but I suggest there are connections to the very thing that makes liberal order so attractive to so many, their robust, almost exclusive and comprehensive encouragement of a radical sort of individualism, for it turns out that liberalism's rejection of the classical monist view carries with it a tendency toward its own sort of monism, this time in favor of lives that are lived only according to our own lights. And since liberal orders concern themselves mostly with our material well-being, it turns out, further, that our social and political lives are increasingly ordered to run encouraging and satisfying individual material desires.

The worry, here, is that middle-aged Americans are dying off at increased rates, even at a time of relative prosperity, in part because we have overwhelmingly come to understand our flourishing almost exclusively in individual, material terms, and that our liberal orders increasingly leave less and less room for any kind of alternative. We have, we might think, merely traded one sort of monism for another, and it is, perhaps, quite literally killing us.

For some, this means we should reject liberalism altogether. They see Case and Deaton's deaths of despair and other similar sorts of phenomena, and conclude that because liberalism has a propensity toward making this sort of hedonistic individualism, the exclusive measure of human flourishing, liberalism, as such, is to be rejected. That seems, to me, a mistake, not

least because liberalism does get at something true about human flourishing, namely that it's tied up with freedom, that to coerce a well-formed conscience is a dreadful thing, and hard to square with respecting a person's dignity.

The Christian tradition has always taught, if not, alas, always practiced, that human persons have a right to live, worship, and act according to conscience, precisely on account of their status as beings created *Imago Dei*, in the image of God, himself. And so, at least in that sense, to reject liberalism whole-hog may actually end up running afoul of basic claims about dignity that we all should affirm. But then it seems like we're sort of stuck. A flourishing society is one in which its basic norms and practices conduce to its members flourishing. Central to that flourishing is having the freedom to order our lives according to conscience, on account of human fallibility and finitude, it seems apparent that, under conditions of freedom, we'll inevitably come to a variety of conclusions about what the good life is, some of which, perhaps many of which, will be deeply flawed, and maybe even injurious to ourselves and others.

What's more, conceiving of our flourishing merely as consisting in a freedom to choose, has the practical tendency of narrowing the object of our choices in different ways of merely satisfying our material, sensual desires. It looks as though we have come to the point where we should admit that a flourishing society is profoundly paradoxical, if not well-nigh impossible. And so we should, for short of God's decisive and scatological action to consummate His redemption of all creation, we cannot order our common lives together in a way that guarantees, or maybe even tends to, the flourishing of each and all, and altogether.

We live under conditions of material and moral scarcity, there is not enough stuff to go around to satisfy our desires, and even if there was, we would still use it badly, in one way or another. We shall not, ourselves, in others words, build the kingdom of God on Earth, and attempts to do so will end only in tragedy and farce. But that's not the end of the story, thankfully, for there's an alternative to both the modern and classical monist models.

The key, I think, is to set aside the notion that the state has a primary or exclusive role to play in human flourishing. The state, especially in its modern liberal form, can do a great deal to protect individuals and groups against gross violations of their dignity, whether that's physical safety, political or civil rights, or even forms of basic material deprivation. But when the state extends its reach and monopolizes education, or looks to reshape religious traditions, or even establishes overweening political control of economic life, we should be very careful, for it's in these spheres of civil society that we can, in our diverse ways, pursue our understandings or flourishing with others of like mind.

In our age, I think, then, the flourishing society is a pluralist one, recognizing that persons and groups have different, and sometime conflicting, views of the good life, and that a range of institutions, not just the state, not just primarily the state, should be empowered to reflect, and develop, and support those views. This means, among other things, we must simultaneously empower and limit the state, giving individuals and groups the space to pursue their view of the good, even when, perhaps especially when, those views seem strange, or offensive, or even noxious.

We should not imagine that such arrangements are easy to navigate, or admit of many bright lines. Quite the contrary, for a pluralist order is inherently imperfect, often messy, morally and politically, and not especially heroic. But given who we are, and who we can realistically be, creatures caught up in our own sinfulness, and yet endowed with inalienable dignity, it's a lot better than the monist alternatives. Thank you.