BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS ESSAY SERIES

Eleventh Essay: Leadership and the Virtues

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'Virtue' is an old-fashioned word. If we use it at all, then when we say something like, "He's virtuous" we mean "He is a goody-goody" or "There are certain things he won't do." The term now connotes something negative, restricted, and weak.

It was not ever thus. The English word 'virtue' comes from the Latin word, *virtus*, which means power. And *virtus* itself comes from the word vir, which one might roughly translate as a manly man. For most centuries in which English was spoken, 'virtue', keeping its original sense, meant an attractive combination of goodness with power. Morality combined with mastery. Sound principle and attractive execution. Flawless self-determination in pursuit of an appealing ideal. You can rely on a virtuous person. He'll help you when you are in need. He'll vindicate the cause of the oppressed. He'll take care of the 'bad guys'. He's not merely someone with good intentions: he does what he professes, and he carries it out reliably.

To get a sense of the ancient notion of virtue, think Aragorn or Braveheart. And according to this notion, women are virtuous, similarly, in being exceptional and strong—not by zapping alien creatures with heavy guns (Sigourney Weaver), which is physical strength, but by being strong in character. It's hard to find characters in the movies or recent literature who are like this, perhaps because displays of that sort of virtue are more difficult to capture in a drama. But Mother Teresa, working tirelessly to give comfort to the dying poor: that's true 'manliness', and that's virtue.

On this old notion, virtue helps us get things done. What restricts and restrains, making someone weak, is its opposite, vice. To see how this might be so, consider different kinds of restrictions. Some are merely external and bodily: for instance, you cannot leave your room, because you are a prisoner and locked within. As a result, there are all kinds of things you simply cannot do, such as going for a bicycle ride or visiting your friend in another city. Similarly, there are bodily restrictions that are not external: because of infantile polio, your legs are paralyzed. And, as a result, you similarly cannot go for a bicycle ride, nor can you visit your friend without special help. Bad legs and a locked door can have much the same effect.

Other restrictions are internal but not bodily, in any obvious sense. Of these, some are the result of a lack of what we call 'skill'. You cannot climb that rock wall (suppose), but your friend can, because the routes up the rock wall have a minimum difficulty of 5.12, and, although your friend is a leading technical climber, you can climb no routes higher

than 5.7.   Your friend has a 'skill' which you lack; therefore, he can do anything that you can do, but more.

In much the same way, a lack of knowledge implies an internal restriction. If you do not know the combination for the safe, you will almost certainly never be able to open it. A coach who has studied and therefore knows the plays of the other team will be able to design a winning game-plan for the championship match.

Virtue, like knowledge or skill, removes restraints. A climber might be kept from climbing a rock wall out of overpowering fear as much as lack of skill: but if he has the virtue of courage, he climbs the wall in spite of any reasonable fears.   Courage is like a skill, because it involves a mastery of fear, and it is like knowledge, because it involves a realistic sense of what things are truly frightening or not.

That coach we mentioned, similarly, will never spend long hours studying films of the other team, if he is constantly distracted, or hates inconvenience, or would prefer to sink into a Lazy Boy with a cold beer in his hand. Some people are capable of concentrated effort over long periods of time, despite their bodies' wanting relaxation and rest. This capability is a virtue, traditionally called 'moderation' or 'self-mastery'.

The virtues are capacities that are generally useful for success in human endeavors, which involve a strengthening and resolve of something internal: call it the 'will'. A coward flees and avoids confrontation; a courageous person continues onward, nonetheless. An immoderate person never 'applies himself' to anything; a moderate person follows through in achieving his ambitions—at least, if he fails, it will be because of something from without, which created a truly necessitating impediment.

But what explains the impression that a virtuous person is someone, merely, who will not do certain things? There are two explanations. First, the extra things that a virtuous person can do, are often either taken for granted, and not attributed to his virtue at all, or they are not valued by someone who lacks the virtue. We're likely to attribute the hard-working coach's efforts solely to his ambition, or to a desire for fame or fortune, without recognizing that someone can want fame all he wants, but he will be entirely incapable of winning it, without real virtue. And, as one is sinking back in one's easy chair with a cold beer in hand, suddenly effort, hard work, and sacrifice will seem quite beside the point.

Second, it is always the case that a power implies a 'specialization', and a specialization implies necessarily that some things get ruled out. An athlete who commits himself to becoming a champion power lifter thereby has to give up eating donuts for lunch. You cannot have the one without giving up the other. A man who pledges lifelong devotion to one woman, ipso facto rules out devotion to other women. In every case in which a virtue

makes someone give up X, there is some Y, which is much better than X, and which is such that it is not possible to have or to esteem both Y and X simultaneously.

Yet if the virtues are indeed about strength and success, then we see immediately why they are important for leadership. We have said that there is no such thing as leadership, only leadership in a domain. Yet, although this is true, still there are traits that a person must have, if he or she is to be a leader in any domain at all. And these are the virtues. Someone who turns and screams "Run away!" is not leading, even if he's the first and fastest at running away. And, although it is possible to bark commands from an easy chair, this would be authoritarianism, not leadership, which always involves 'leading by doing.' Pick the nastiest job; role up your sleeves; and start doing it: now you are in a position to tell someone else to do it also and be taken seriously.

Yet the virtues are necessary not simply for being a leader, but also for grasping the goal towards which one is leading others. After all, what is the point of leadership? What is its ultimate goal? Is the goal of a military captain, who is a leader, merely victory in battle, and nothing more than that? Is the goal of a student government president, who is undeniably a leader, nothing more than some new resolution or regulation? What are we aiming at, anyway? What is it all for?

To answer this question, we must see that leadership is always over persons, not things. Thus, leadership necessarily involves not merely achieving things (victory, good

legislation), but also, and primarily, shaping persons.   At the end of the day, a true leader wants to be able to say both 'We achieved this', and 'We became better persons in achieving this'.   But people become better, only through growing in the virtues.

The ultimate goal of all leadership, then, is the virtue of the persons one is leading. No one ever led another to a goal that he did not himself see. It follows that no one can quite be a true leader, without having a definite idea of what the virtues are. And if knowledge of the virtues is itself a kind of virtue— indeed, the chief virtue (follow the ancients and call it 'wisdom'—then here again is something that one is restricted from doing, if one lacks the proper virtue.