

John Casey's  
*Pagan Virtue: An Essay in Ethics*  
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

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In a memorable line in his *The Illusion of Technique*, William Barrett confides to his reader that he would have been seduced by Buddhism, if the Bible and Russian novels had not kept getting in the way.<sup>1</sup> Early in his *Pagan Virtue* John Casey expresses a similar sentiment about adopting a thoroughly pagan ethic. Too much time has passed and too many competing ideas have held sway for anyone to forego the other aspects of our "complicated inheritance"<sup>2</sup> and become pagan to the core.

Still, getting straight on exactly what a pagan ethic might look like is in Casey's estimation a worthwhile endeavor. The reason for this, according to Casey, is that we (that is, we Westerners) have long been of two minds about ethical matters. One mind, the "Christian" one, has been primarily other-worldly, concerned with persons as rational agents, with the possession of a good will. The other mind, the "pagan" one, is decidedly this-worldly, concerned with persons as beings either favored or unfavored by fortune and with the possession of practical wisdom. The trouble with this two-mindedness is that we are unaware of it. Casey intends to change this by developing and advocating a pagan position. Thus, his hope is not to convert us into pagans but rather to make us aware of and perhaps more sympathetic to the presence of the pagan in our ethical tradition.

Casey acknowledges that his purpose requires his primary aim to be one of "modest rediscovery and (hence) criticism" of our ethical tradition. Casey warns his reader that his criticism is not what is often thought of as "philosophical criticism"; instead, he likens it to literary criticism, since in his estimation a moral philosopher "cannot fruitfully assume that what he does stands outside history." In other words, the moral philosopher is not in the position to design a morality *ex nihilo* because his guiding sympathies, his intuitions, have been (at least in part) formed by his historical station. *Qua* moral philosopher, the best he can do is to comment on and to interpret the continuing narrative, so to speak, of which he is a part - his and his culture's history. Suggestions toward changing the direction of the narrative can, of course, be made, but they must be circumspect and must not presume to entirely reroute the narrative's direction. Casey remains admirably true to his intention throughout the book. His approach to the issues is consistently ruminative, not argumentative.

One of the most interesting issues Casey explores is the role of anger in our moral lives, an issue he returns to repeatedly.<sup>3</sup> Casey's claim is that anger, proper anger, may be a moral achievement. Failure to become angry in appropriate situations is the result of "poor-spiritedness." A person who is never angry, or who at best reacts by retreating into a sort of "dumb mortification" when mistreated lacks the necessary confidence in himself that self-assertion demands. And a person who lacks this has a diminished "sense of what he is."

That Casey chose to spend a great deal of effort describing and appraising the role of anger in our moral lives is evidence that he is indeed exploring an aspect of our moral lives often overlooked.<sup>4</sup> With the exception of occasional harassing of money-changers, anger and actions which express it have been devalued if not condemned by most modern, Christian-influenced moral theorists. Thinking about an ethical tradition which assigned high value to anger and actions which express it, which is what Casey induces us to do, throws new light on the moral theory or theories we tend to inhabit. The new light shows us that our previously comfortable theoretical home might have been usefully drawn on a different plan.

Casey's debt to Aristotle, who is most often invoked when the pagan tradition is being explored, is obvious. Also, his debt to both MacIntyre and Nussbaum will be clear to anyone familiar with their work.

On the whole, Casey's book is an excellent treatment of its topic. It enhances our understanding of both the pagan ethical tradition and our own. It also demonstrates unsuspected philosophical similarities, like that of Sartre to Aristotle. Casey's style is natural and easy and his mastery of a heterogenous set of thinkers is impressive. The book's

only fault, if indeed an intended aspect of a book can be cited as a fault, is its lack of pointed argumentation. Like a person enjoying a relaxed conversation with a learned friend, Casey's reader is sometimes hard-pressed not to lose the thread of the discussion while attending to its graces.

1. William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978), p. 343
2. The phrase is Casey's, from his Introduction, p. ix.
3. A brief glance at Casey's index is enough to confirm this.
4. There are also chapters on "Courage" and "Temperance."