

Book Section
Review Essay

Democracy and Moral Development: A Politics of Virtue.
By David L. Norton. University of California Press, 1991.

A good government produces citizens distinguished for their courage, love of justice, and every other good quality; -- *Dionysius of Halicarnassus*

Democracy and Moral Development (hereafter DMD) is in many ways an attempt to make out a case for the above claim. As David Norton puts it: "the paramount function of government is to provide the necessary but non-self-suppliable conditions for optimizing opportunities for individual self-discovery and self-development" (p. 80). In a previous book, *Personal Destinies* (Princeton University Press, 1976) hereafter PD, Norton laid out a eudaimian ethics which stressed virtue over rule-following. In DMD he lays out a politics of virtue arguing that a certain type of society is requisite to the good life of the individual. Yet he does this from an individualist perspective and not from a collectivist or coercive communitarian one.

Norton is an individualist arguing for a more than minimal role for government in the life of the individual. In modern times classical liberalism has been the major individualist political tradition and one that favors minimal government. Thus Norton spends a good deal of effort developing his views in contrast to what he takes to be classical liberalism. One of my tasks here will be to lay out some of these differences, especially regarding the role of government. I have already mentioned that Norton thinks government ought to play a larger role in the life of the individual but I will postpone a more detailed treatment of this issue until later.

At root, the difference (as Norton sees it) between his position and that of the classical liberal lies in their different conceptions of the individual. The key difference between Norton's (eudaimonistic) view and the classical liberal¹ (or modern) view of the individual is that the former is a developmental conception. Norton claims that the modern view treats the

self as a *fait accompli*. In both *DMD* and *PD* he argues convincingly that to do this is a grave mistake. The implicit assumptions of his argument is that the classical liberal's minimal government position is attractive to those who hold the non-developmental view of the self, and that once this view of the individual is given up the role that government is to play grows.

One of the major consequences of non-developmental individualism is what Norton calls "moral minimalism". This is the view that most (or at least some) of one's experiences are without moral significance. In opposition to this Norton claims that individuals don't encounter moral problems, they are moral problems.

Human being is a problematic being; to be a human being is to be at bottom a problem to oneself, specifically an identity problem. It is the problem of deciding what to become and endeavoring to become it. (p.2)

This point is one that distinguishes Norton's position from both the modern and communitarian views of the individual. His view differs from the modern view in its explicit rejection of moral minimalism. And though he shares with the communitarians the idea that the self must be expressed in a community, he adds that one must discover which community is right for oneself (p.132), thus giving individuality priority over community.

Contrary to the moral minimalist, for the eudaimonist all of one's actions have moral import.

For eudaimonistic theory, all human conduct without exception has moral meaning, and the relevant distinctions are first, of course, between right and wrong actions, and second, between acts of maximal moral meaning and acts of minimal moral meaning. (p.21)

Norton claims -- citing the work of J.G.A. Pocock -- that the decisive step away from this more inclusive view and toward moral minimalism was made when Machiavelli rejected Aristotelian ethics for one suited to persons "as they are or as they are capable of speedily becoming" (pp. 21-22). Thus efforts at self-transcendence, while not being ruled out, are no longer thought to be required of the moral man.

That Norton has correctly characterized the way that many people today think about morality is, I think, undeniable and Norton clearly shows some of the major flaws with this view. Leaving aside questions regarding his characterization of the ethics of classical liberal individualism,² Norton makes a good case against moral minimalism and for a more developmental conception of the individual; one which regards growth and self-actualization as essential to morality.

Although Norton does not include a direct discussion of value in his book I consider it here because I think that his conception is fundamentally flawed and this flaw leads to some of his conclusions with

which I shall take issue later. Early in the book, while setting out the fundamentals of his eudaimian ethics, Norton rejects what he refers to as the altruist/egoist bifurcation of ethics (p. 7). He claims that, on the eudaimonistic understanding, one is realizing objective worth and this is valuable both to oneself and to others. Thus the question of for whose benefit one ought to act becomes a non-issue or at most a secondary matter. I think this is mistaken. It also seems that much of what Norton argues for could be better formulated on an egoist foundation. I may agree with Norton that the self-actualizing individual is realizing objective worth, but objective here does not mean intrinsic. I will argue that Norton's attempt to transcend the altruist/egoist bifurcation fails and that it is important to decide for whom something is of value or worth.

Any correct conception of value is logically dependent upon two further points: the individual(s) to whom something is a value, and the purpose for which it is valuable.³ The very conception of value logically requires both a subject and a purpose or end.⁴ This being the case, any attempt to do without either will lead one into serious difficulties when attempting to identify values.

Subjectivism is the result of retaining the subject and dropping the end. We are left without any standard except the perception of the thing as a value to an agent. On the other hand if we drop the subject and leave only the end we are left with free floating abstract values which are values to nobody in particular or to everybody in some mysterious way. If both subject and end are dropped the identification of values becomes a completely mysterious process.

At times Norton seems to recognize the importance of one or the other of these two aspects of value but never both and occasionally neither. He is often extremely careful to identify values with a subject but not in the sense that they are values for the subject but in the sense that they are values that the subject is responsible for realizing. Individuals are required to actualize 'objective' value or worth:

which is to say it is of worth not solely or primarily to the individual who actualizes it, but also to (some) other persons -- specifically to such others as can recognize, appreciate, and utilize the distinctive kind of worth that the given individual manifests. (p.7)

Notice that utility is merely one of the qualities a value may have, thus values are not necessarily for an end. The reason why this is so is that for Norton values are primarily intrinsic. They are simply out there as possibilities to be identified with or recognized; there may be a goal that they facilitate, but this is a secondary matter.

This leaves us in need of a standard by which to identify what the values are. For Norton, value identification is "not identification of values, instead it is the individual's identification of himself or herself with

certain values" (p. 84). This would be fine if the identification of values were unproblematic. However it is a problem, and we need a standard by which we can identify what things are values or valuable before we can identify with them. Norton attempts to avoid this problem by claiming that there are criteria for value identification so that one may do it rightly or wrongly. Thus:

The right values-identification by an individual is his or her explicit identification... with the values which he or she is implicitly -- that is, innately -- identified. *These are the values in service of which the individual will experience the intrinsic rewards of personal fulfillment.* (pp. 84-85 emphasis added)

According to this account there are certain innate (and intrinsic) values one is responsible to actualize and as a secondary matter one will experience the intrinsic rewards of self-fulfillment. But this has things backward. It is better to say that one ought to act to achieve certain ends because they are valuable to one as a means to self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment, for its part, includes the development of those capacities which are specifically aimed at life sustenance and enhancement. Thus, self-fulfillment, which is the discovery and becoming of the particular being that one is, is instrumental to one's existence. We may then say that in a fundamental sense the standard of value is one's existence.⁵ To flourish means to spend one's life developing and exercising those individual capacities which are instrumental to the sustenance of one's life⁶ as the particular being one is. Norton, by separating values from the individual ends they serve, makes the utility of values a secondary matter. As he sees it, value is something which is primarily intrinsic.⁷

But how are we to identify these intrinsic values? If we attempt to equate or correlate individual potentialities with values, we must have a way of determining which of these potentialities are, or lead to, values. The problems with this approach are compounded in the case of valuing others where it becomes more difficult to even identify the potentialities, let alone to decide which of these potentialities are, or would lead to, values. To avoid problems like this we must understand utility as being essential to value.

Norton's discussion of virtue is one of the areas that is effected by this intrinsic conception of value. He describes virtue in the following way:

In the conception of personhood and the good life that we are employing, "enhancement of the quality of life of human beings" means the acquisition by human beings of moral virtues, where moral virtues are understood as dispositions of character that are (1) personal utilities; (2) intrinsic goods; and (3) social utilities. (pp. 80-81)

Since he describes virtues as being intrinsic goods one might expect his treatment of them to have all the problems that the conception of intrinsic goods does. In fact these problems are almost all eliminated

because he also claims that "all virtues are personal utilities". (p. 91) Thus we can identify them as dispositions of character which are conducive to the happiness of the individual possessing them. The discussion of the virtues, particularly in chapter four is excellent and with slight modifications is amenable to an ethical egoist theory of value which avoids the problems of value identification discussed above. Norton's discussion of 'the unity of the virtues' and the virtue of integrity is particularly excellent. Regarding integrity Norton says that:

to be a human being is to be obliged to decide what to become and endeavor to become it. Significant success at endeavoring to become what one has chosen to become requires integration of faculties, desires, interests, roles, and life-shaping choices, such that aspects in each of these categories complement others, and all aspects alike contribute toward the chosen end. This integration must be achieved out of an initial disorder that was enduringly depicted by Plato in his image of the human soul as a chariot, charioteer and two fractious horses, one struggling to rise aloft while the other seeks to plunge below. (*Phaedrus*). In this condition the chariot cannot move and is at risk of being torn asunder. It symbolizes the disordered and internally contradictory condition of the self in which integration has not in significant measure been achieved. Such a self will be ineffective at achieving its ends and equivocal or contradictory in identification of them. (p. 87)

So, even though Norton's account of the virtues is flawed due to his intrinsic theory of value, since he also makes the claim that the virtues are personal utilities, his account of what the virtues are and their relation to each other is compatible with ethical egoism.⁸ This means that it needn't rely on the value theory that Norton uses to support it.

While his account of the virtues might be compatible with an ethical egoism, his idea of the role of government is not. Once again he takes issue with classical liberals for reducing the role of government too far, but being an individualist he sees the necessity of placing limits on its scope.

If we term both social engineering and the welfare state "maximal government," and the night-watchman state of classical liberalism "minimal government," then good government, eudaimonistically conceived, lies intermediate between them, as conducive government. (p. 166)

To better understand what 'conducive government' is one ought to note that Norton considers his politics to be a revisionist Platonism. He accepts Plato's account of what the role and aim of government ought to be: "complementary interrelationship of self-directed, eudaimonic human lives on the foundation of (Platonic) justice".⁹ But he says that he:

departs from Plato on the means by which this end is to be achieved. Thanks to modern sociological and developmental knowledge we are positioned to recognize some of what Plato took to be means as in fact obstructions.

For example one thing he takes exception to is Plato's idea that one of the functions of the rulers is to identify the natures of children (since they cannot do so for themselves) and to educate them accordingly. Norton objects that children are essentially dependent and are required to adopt socially conferred personalities which mask the innate individual that they alone may discover and venture to become. Thus it would be impossible for the leaders to discover this innate individual as Plato would have them do.

Yet there seems to be a more fundamental objection that one could make to Plato than one based on modern developments on sociology and developmental psychology. This objection would draw upon the relationship between choice and value. As noted above, Norton claims that individuals are moral problems and thus all of their actions are morally significant. Individuals must evaluate the various alternatives open to them and make intelligent choices. Thus he recognizes the importance of choice, yet because he incorporates so much into the moral sphere the link between choice and the moral good is in danger of being misconstrued.

While it is true that something may be said to be good, regardless of how it came to be, the morally good must be freely chosen. Indeed, in order for our actions to be either morally good or bad they must be products of choice. Norton seems to recognize this, yet, he claims that all of our actions have moral import because they are all chosen in some sense. Yet, in an important way actions which are freely chosen (that is, are not coerced by others) are related more fundamentally to morality. They are the type of actions which are associated with the flourishing individual.

If our actions and characters are determined by factors out of our control then there is no room for morality. Imagine the case of someone who is inflicted with a disorder such that he cannot control his body well enough to act as he intends. For example when he wants to raise his right arm he lifts his left leg, or if he wants to turn his head he, instead, makes a fist. He is thus capable of intending to act but how he acts is out of his control. His actions are not the products of his judgement and choice, he is not self-directed. Even if, by some stroke of luck, all of his actions had consequences that were good for him, perhaps even better than the actions he intended would have had, he would not be flourishing. He has not developed any character and, though his actions would have been virtuous had he chosen them, we cannot call him virtuous.

Now take for instance the case of a man who is forced to commit a certain act A at gunpoint. It is true that the development of his character is up to him so that he is responsible for acting bravely, rashly or like a coward. Thus his action will have some moral import. Yet, if we are to

take seriously the idea that the good that he ought to aim at is self-actualization, and that this involves the use of reason in guiding one's actions, we can see that he cannot be flourishing if his own decisions are consistently pre-empted in this manner. So, while the person in our example might be responsible for A in some sense, if he is consistently deprived of the freedom to choose his actions he will never be able to flourish.

We may therefore agree with Norton in saying that all of our acts have moral import but we should add that some do so directly and some derivatively. In the case described above the man being held at gunpoint is free to respond to this situation bravely, rashly, or like a coward. However, this possibility depends on his having been free to act in the past according to his own judgement, so that he might develop the character that manifests itself when he is coerced. If he has never been free to direct his actions in the past, he, like the completely incontinent man described above, would never have developed any character at all. Thus uncoerced actions are moral in the primary sense while those which are coerced¹⁰ may be so only in a derivative sense. In other words those actions which lead to character development and are related to human flourishing and self-actualization must be uncoerced, that is, they must be the product of the judgement of the individual in question.

What I have been arguing here is that the moral good must be freely chosen. All morally good actions must be chosen and for this reason we must be careful to avoid metaphysical determinism¹¹; but flourishing and the development of virtue also require action that is not coerced. In short, human flourishing is a self-directed activity¹² which has as a necessary condition that one's actions be freely chosen. This is the intimate connection between freedom and morality. Freedom is a necessary but not sufficient condition for human flourishing. Norton, following Plato, fails to correctly identify the relationship between freedom and flourishing. This failure has political consequences that run counter to the possibility of human flourishing.

In PD Norton argues that "In self-determination, 'freedom for' takes logical precedence over 'freedom from'". Thus mere absence of constraints is not true freedom. True freedom is freedom for an end, namely, self-actualization or flourishing. But put this way one is in danger of identifying good acts with free acts such that, if one has done the good, then one has acted freely. However, if I am right and freedom is a necessary -- but not sufficient -- prerequisite to human flourishing, then we need an independent means of identifying freedom. We cannot identify free individuals as being those who are flourishing. Freedom must leave open the possibility of making bad choices as well as good ones.

If one recognizes this important relationship then we can again see the value of minimal government without being moral minimalists. Govern-

ment is to afford to individuals the freedom (by protecting their rights¹³) they need to make choices and to act on them. This freedom is a prerequisite to the development of virtue. Thus the minimal government of classical liberalism is conducive government and, to the extent that any attempt to expand the role of government is destructive of this rights protecting function, it is undesirable. Minimal government is actually a misnomer in this context, for the key thing to note about the classical liberal conception of government is not that it is minimal but that it is limited. This limiting serves a dual function. On the one hand it protects the individual from the dangers of the totalitarian regime. On the other it is good for the government in that it fosters the realization of its end -- this end necessarily being in harmony with those of the individual citizens.

It was noted earlier that Norton's idea of a good government lies somewhere between the welfare state and minimal government. If, however, we look at some of the policies which he advocates it is hard to see how his idea of government differs from the welfare state. For example on page 122 he brings up 'rights to subsistence'. In this context he prefers the term workfare to welfare to stress that it is responsibilities based rather than rights based. He says that:

If it is [self-fulfilling productivity] that constitutes the well being of persons that society exists to promote, then workfare must include opportunity for exploration and choice among a wide range of types of work, *and this mandates national administration.* (p.122 emphasis added)

It is this last clause that is precisely at issue and needs to be argued for. Why exactly is this an issue for national government and not individuals or community groups? For that matter, why not global administration? Furthermore it seems nationalizing the attempt at providing these opportunities would eliminate choice and variety, for though all individuals are not the same, justice requires they be treated equally by the government. Introducing the Platonic notion of proportional equality, which takes into account relevant differences between individuals, doesn't help here because of the epistemological problems involved in determining, on such a large scale, normative differences between individuals. This problem parallels, and dwarfs in difficulty, the socialist calculation problem¹⁴. While it may be possible in a family or in a tribe it is simply not possible in the extended order. The type of knowledge required is so difficult to obtain, that only the individual and perhaps a few close friends may have it. It is just not reasonable to expect the government to have anything approaching this kind of knowledge of individuals. The best it can do is create an environment where people are free (from the interference of others) to act in accordance with their own judgement and in cooperation with others. What this amounts to is the classical liberal conception of government.

While Norton does make a compelling case for the existence of certain

conditions which are not self-suppliable¹⁵ and necessary for self-actualization, it is not clear that, aside from the above case of protecting rights, they ought to be provided by government. In fact it seems clear that they can be better provided by other institutions such as the family, church, community groups, etc.¹⁶

Yet many of these things (such as education and health care) are vitally important to human flourishing, thus there is a desire for some to attempt to guarantee them. For many leaving these things up to smaller and more contingent groups appears too risky, or at least less risky than assigning them to government where one would be entitled to them 'by right'.¹⁷ But this guarantee is chimerical; the government cannot even guarantee the protection of the negative rights that the classical liberal desires it to safeguard.

Furthermore, the more it ventures from protecting rights the more difficulty it will have doing even this. Limits are placed on government in order to enable it to attain its end -- the protection of individual rights. A good constitution provides the principles which serve to integrate the various functions of government. A government, in order to be effective and helpful, must act in ways that its citizens can understand and usually predict. In order to do this it must treat all of its citizens as if they were the same. This does not mean that it must ignore normative individual differences. What it does mean is that these differences are, for the most part, to be dealt with formally; principles must be established which deal with individuals as 'X's. These principles may specify context and even type of individual (e.g. minors, members of corporations, etc.) but they cannot pay any regard to those distinctly individuating aspects of a person which make them more than an X. In short government should treat individual normative differences formally not substantively.

Platonic justice, which considers individual normative differences in their substance, cannot treat individuals alike. Thus a government designed on this model will not be able to formulate principles by which to deal with its citizens except for very ambiguous ones such as 'to each according to his need'. These sorts of principles, while fine in the context of a family, in a more extended society, are bound to seem arbitrary to the members of that society. A government that acts predictably produces order conducive to extended plans of action and character development by individuals. A government that acts unpredictably is simply another threat to be dealt with. It is for this reason that extending the bounds of government in the way that Norton suggests poses a threat to the proper functioning of government and to human flourishing.

My main concern here has been to examine and take issue with Norton's claim that "the paramount function of government is to provide the necessary but non-self-suppliable conditions for optimizing opportunities of individual self-discovery and self-development" (p. 44). There is

nothing objectionable in this statement if it is interpreted to mean that the government, by protecting rights (in accordance with the classical liberal model), creates an environment where individuals may cooperate and combine their efforts in ways that each judges to be beneficial. But to interpret it as Norton does is a mistake.

Even if one finds arguments for a eudaimonistic ethics convincing and therefore regards individual self-actualization as the primary good to be achieved, given the fact that the moral good must be chosen, each individual must be left to be convinced that this is the good. Any attempt to preempt or override this choice, by attempting to force people to do what is truly good for them is self-defeating. The role of government is precisely to protect individuals from this force. By forcing people to do 'the good', i.e. what would have been good for them if they had chosen it (for example going to school or choosing a particular career), government is acting contrary to its own purpose. It is also obstructing the moral development of its citizens. On the other hand, by protecting the freedom of individuals to act in response to what they judge to be the good it is protecting the very possibility of moral action or what Norton might call acts of maximal moral meaning.¹⁸

Mark Turiano

Emory University

1. I will not take up whether or not Norton's is an accurate characterization of classical liberalism (though I doubt it is) for two reasons. First, I don't think that Norton's more substantive political arguments depend on this, and secondly, to do so would steer the discussion toward certain debates which are outside the purview of DMD and hence this review.

2. I leave these issues aside here but I do have doubts that he has correctly characterized the ethics of classical liberalism -- the cases of John Locke and Wilhelm von Humboldt come to mind here. There are also several contemporary authors in the classical liberal tradition to whom Norton's description would certainly not apply. In particular Tibor R. Machan, Douglas B. Rasmussen, Douglas J. Den Uyl, and Eric Mack.

3. This is a point that was developed by Ayn Rand. See especially her essays "The Objectivist Ethics" in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York, Signet 1964) and "What is Capitalism" in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York, Signet 1967).

4. This does not mean that all values are wholly instrumental values. Some things may, in fact, come to be valued primarily because they have their own ends and are not merely instrumental to serving one's own ends (e.g. other individuals). However, all values, being things about which we are concerned and which make a difference to us, must, in some sense, be instrumental to our ends.

5. This again is a point which was developed by Ayn Rand. See "The Objectivist Ethics" op. cit.

6. As I will discuss below, Norton himself argues that "all virtues are personal utilities" (p. 91)

7. Thus Norton makes reference to 'intrinsically rewarding work' (p. 61); he calls virtues

'dispositions of character that are intrinsic goods' (p. 81); and he refers to the intrinsic rewards of actions (p. 62) and tenure (p. 94).

8. In this regard see Tibor R. Machan: *Human Rights and Human Liberties* [(especially ch.3) Chicago, Nelson and Hall, 1975].

9. Platonic justice means proportional justice, that is, it is based on an equality which includes considerations of individual differences. Norton contrasts this with classical liberal or 'merely formal' equality (i.e. equality under law).

10. The individual must be free to make what Norton refers to as "life-shaping choices".

11. In fact, Norton is quite careful to avoid metaphysical determinism. See especially his discussion in chapter 5 of *Personal Destinies*, op. cit.

12. For a discussion of this point see :Douglas B. Rasmussen "Liberalism and Natural End Ethics" *American Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 27, pp.153-160.

13. Rights here are the 'negative' rights of the classical liberal.

14. The impossibility of a single individual or group making the necessary calculations to run an economy has been dealt with at length by the Austrian economists. See Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (London, Jonathan Cape 1969).

15. Non self-suppliable may be too strong a term to use because in some sense many of these conditions are what we make of them and are in this way self-supplied. For instance many people manage to turn what most would consider adversity to their advantage, while others in the same situation will not derive any benefit from it -- though they might have.

16. This is largely an empirical matter which I do not deal with here because of space considerations and because Norton hasn't dealt with it in his book. However, he has attempted to argue that negative and positive rights are compatible with each other, contrary to the claim of classical liberals. He does this by basing rights on responsibilities. One is entitled to have certain things provided for oneself because they are necessary conditions for the fulfillment of one's responsibilities. Yet Norton has not dealt with the difficulties of determining and coordinating all of these responsibilities. The scope of this problem would be even greater than that of simple socialist planning of an economy. This seems to lead us back (as socialism did in eastern Europe) to the totalitarianism which many associate with Platonic political philosophy. Though Norton denies that the two are connected he simply fails to show that this is the case.

17. For Norton this right would be based on a prior responsibility.

18. I would like to thank Tibor Machan, Greg Johnson, Roy Childs and Tom Palmer for their comments and suggestions regarding this essay.