In Search of Wisdom

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he foundations of moral consensus in society have been eroded almost imperceptibly since the fifteenth century. The stunning success of inductive reasoning and experimental science, combined with philosophical ideas about the nature of what we might know, has led to the privatization of faith and the unfortunate disregard for agreed wisdom amidst the accumulating information we are bombarded with. We have come to believe that science is all we need, and that all "real" knowledge is scientific. The idea that we ought to believe some things to be true has been replaced by our choices of what we want to believe.

As Allan Bloom remarks in The Closing of the American Mind (p. 60),

> My grandparents found reasons for the existence of their family and the fulfillment of their duties in serious writings, and they interpreted their special sufferings with respect to a great and ennobling past. Their simple faith and practices linked them to great scholars and thinkers who dealt with the same material, not from outside or from an alien perspective, but believing as they did, while simply going deeper and providing guidance. There was a respect for real learning, because it had a felt connection with their lives. This is what a community and a history mean, a common experience inviting high and low into a single body of belief.

I do not believe that my generation, my cousins who have been educated in the American way, all of whom are MDs or PhDs, have any comparable learning. When they talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, parents and children, the human condition, I hear nothing but clichés, superficialities, the material of satire. I am not

saying anything so trite as that life is fuller when people have myths to live by. I mean rather that a life based on the Book is closer to the truth, that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to the real nature of things. Without the great revelations, epics, and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, the mind will remain unfurnished.

Once this mindset was established, it was logically inevitable that we should try to form public policy and morality solely on the basis of scientifically demonstrable facts. The argument that it is impossible to get from physical facts to ethical truths is convincing to many, including this author. Surprisingly, Darwin also thought that the logic of his theory could not lead to predictable morality or wisdom.

Public policy concerns what is best for the flourishing of a society. It is very clear that, in most instances, it is not possible to get from physical facts to moral injunctions. If you have cancer and I have a cure, this does not logically lead to the injunction that I should give the cure to you. If I am a Darwinian and I inherit your estate, the opposite injunction is logical. Only if the general principle "to save life is good" holds true, can you connect the facts to a moral injunction via the general principle. Nevertheless, public policy is formed by assuming, without proof, that we can get from physical data (such as the rate of unwanted pregnancies) to the moral injunction that we ought to legalize abortion and give the morning-after pill to teenagers. This way of arguing is a philosophical sleight of hand and

has nothing to do with wisdom and everything to do with utilitarianism.

Human rights are changed by such decisions. We see ourselves as highly developed and rather dangerous animals, able to control our destiny according to our own will and desire without reference to ancient wisdom. Robert Frost put it most elegantly and presciently:

As long on earth as our comparisons were stoutly upwards,

With gods and angels we were men at least,
But little lower that the angels.
But once comparisons were yielded downwards,
Once we began to see our images
Reflected in the mud and even dust,
'Twas disillusion upon disillusion,
We were lost piecemeal to the animals.

In 1979 Arthur Leff at Duke University spoke just once on the philosophy of justice in a lecture entitled, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law". He wrote,

I want to believe and so do you in a complete, transcendent and immanent set of propositions about right and wrong, findable rules that authoritatively and unambiguously direct us how to live our lives righteously. I also want to believe and so do you in no such thing, but rather that we are wholly free, not only to choose for ourselves what we want to do, but to decide for ourselves individually and as a species what we ought to be. What we want heaven help us is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free, that is at the same time to discover the right and the good and to create it.

Today, in the pursuit of freedom, justice has become the exercise of power by the powerful over the weak. It stems from our espousal of a philosophy based on individual rights divorced from any sense of ultimate judgment and wisdom beyond ourselves. John Patrick is President and a Founding Member of Augustine College, which opened in 1997 and is in its sixteenth year of operation. Dr. Patrick retired from the University of Ottawa in June 2002 having served as Associate Professor in Clinical Nutrition in the Department of Biochemistry and Paediatrics for some twenty years. His medical training was in London, England. He has done extensive research into the treatment of childhood nutritional deficiency and related diseases holding appointments in Britain, the West Indies, and Canada. He has also worked in Central Africa assisting in the development of training programs that deal with childhood malnutrition.

Dr. Patrick now lectures throughout the world speaking in several countries each year on medical ethics, public policy, culture, and faith. This past year's engagements have included talks in the United Kingdom, Lebanon, Jamaica, the United States (Virginia, Wisconsin, Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Connecticut, Washington, Nevada, California, Oregon, and Arkansas), and Canada.

There are many talks by Dr. Patrick available for order, at no cost, on the Augustine College website.