

Centore, F. F. *Two Views of Virtue: Absolute Relativism and Relative Absolutism*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. 216 pp.

William Bennett—author of the best-selling *Book of Virtue*, and former secretary of education (under President Reagan)—has said that a large part of education is merely restating the obvious. High among these “obviousities,” for Bennett, is the notion that parents owe their children not unconditional *approval*, but unconditional *love*. Bennett, who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, understands that to approve anything your child does is to center morality in his subjective will, but to love him centers morality in his objective being. Approval can be mere flattery. Love is always directed to what is good.

This difference between a capricious will and one’s real and stable nature is, for F. F. Centore, a key to understanding the difference between two radically distinct, though often confused, notions of virtue.

In the first of his four-chapter work, Centore presents the model for virtue fashioned by such thinkers as Parmenides, Emerson, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre. The main problem with this model is that virtue is anything an individual wants it to be. It relativizes the absolute to fit the isolated individual, without concern for either reality or community. It is an extreme and one-sided form of an “inner-directed” ethics. “Self-reliance,” the “autonomous self,” “the self-made man,” are various forms of self-deception—subjectivism severed from any stabilizing objective correlatives.

The second chapter examines the opposite pole: objectivity shorn of subjectivity.

Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, J. S. Mill, Karl Popper, and Richard Rorty provide examples of the second model. This “outer-directed” ethics is as one-sided and inadequate as its polar opposite. Its main problems are: neglect of the individual and scorn for the minority. It celebrates “tolerance,” “openness,” “freedom,” and “broadmindedness.” Yet these amorphous substitutes for true virtue also rest on the unreliable foundation of the will. Neither “individual-think” nor “group-think” offer models for virtue that balance the person with society.

The third model is an attempt to overcome the extremes of the first two. It appeals to a greater or larger good. But again, there is no firm basis that justifies this vision. Centore refutes radical feminism, proportionalism, and consequentialism for their arbitrariness, inconsistencies, and willful biases. The third view also suffers from subjectivism and, in essence, is reducible to the second, which in turn is reducible to the first. The latter, having no reliable foundation itself, leads to nihilism. Thus, Centore uses his first three chapters to show that by relativizing the absolute, we place ourselves on the road to nihilism.

The fourth chapter presents a view of authentic virtue based on the natural law. Virtue fulfills the natural law. And by fulfilling the natural law, each person fulfills himself as he takes his rightful place in society. The natural law, being a reflection of the eternal law, is a creation of God. Centore calls upon Aquinas to illuminate virtue in this sense.

Following Aquinas, Centore argues that wherever there is a nature (or essence) there is a law. This law is constituted by the inner dynamism that orders any nature to its end.

True virtue, then, is what human beings need in order to follow the path that leads them from their nature at any stage of its development to subsequent stages and on toward its completeness. Thus, Centore goes on to explain, the virtue or vice of a being is determined by whether or not it fulfills that being's nature. Of course, if there is no such thing as an objective human nature, virtue in this sense becomes incomprehensible. What the philosophers who populate the first three chapters fail to recognize is the dynamic unfolding nature of the human being that is ordered to an end. Virtue guides a person to that end, and it is in this sense Aquinas asserts that virtue is founded in the natural law.

"Good sex," according to contemporary mass media moguls, is intensely pleasurable sex, detached from all teleological considerations. But this form of sex, as has been well documented, inevitably becomes trapped within a net of competition. Thus, trapped, fidelity, commitment, marriage, the family, and psychological health soon become its casualties. For Aquinas, on the other hand, "good sex" (virtuous sex) is between husband and wife, and honors its natural and procreative ordination. Virtue morality based on the natural law, therefore, has the future in sight. And this is why, Centore reasons, that civil law should have a deep respect for natural law. Accordingly, he concludes that "The basic axiom of the natural moral law is the most practical one—do good and shun evil—and its basic precepts are found highlighted in the Ten Commandments. All societies, if they are to survive at all, must adhere, more or less, to the Ten Commandments. The closer the adherence the higher the level of civilization."

The fraudulent view of virtue, discussed in the first three chapters, is the apotheosis of relativism. The authentic view of virtue submits to God as the Creator of nature. It is, therefore, theocentric, rather than anthropocentric.

Centore does not specify virtues. His study explores the difference between a

God-centered approach to morality that is based on the will of God versus a man-centered morality based on the will of man. This is a crucial distinction, and one that eludes secular society.

G. K. Chesterton once said that if there were no God, there would be no atheists. By extension, we can also say that if there were no God, there would be no virtue. Making this point, drawing extensively upon the history of philosophy—clearly, cogently, and convincingly—is the main virtue of this important study.

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Eisenberg, Mickey S. *Life in the Balance: Emergency Medicine and the Quest to Reverse Sudden Death*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 304 pp.

Life in the Balance: Emergency Medicine and The Quest to Reverse Sudden Death is an excellent review and analysis of the history of efficacious resuscitation developed over the last two hundred years. However, the book is marred by the inclusion of several chapters and a chronology that contain an inaccurate antireligious history of Western thought. Despite this major limitation, Dr. Mickey S. Eisenberg comprehensively documents the painstaking efforts of the multitude of industrious men and women who placed together the pieces of the sudden death puzzle.

Throughout the text, Dr. Eisenberg skillfully inserts explanations of cardiac emergency terminology and procedures such as ventricular fibrillation, angina, asystole, myocardial infarction, ischemia, chest compressions, CPR, and defibrillation. He outlines the development of the ABC's of modern medical emergency management: the triad of airway, breathing, circulation, and the necessity of all three for