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Review Of "Reverence: Renewing A Forgotten Virtue" By P. Woodruff

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Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*
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describe both events, but surely claiming that Athena helped the Greeks, or God helped the Israelites, in an ancient battle is not such a great difference that we cannot so much as understand the ancient event, so described, as a “battle.” Ancient and modern battles will in any case differ greatly; why should the purported intervention of a divine being be a difference that makes the word lose its application altogether? There may be good reasons, including theological ones, not to suppose that either Athena or God would participate in battles, but the applicability of general terms is not among them.

The inadequacy of Williams’s attempt to reject premodern ways of writing history is but one instance of the general problem that he says almost nothing about how the truth of explanations relates to the truth of fact reporting, and nothing, in particular, to defend the naturalism that he seems to regard as essential to any truthful explanation. This is a great failing, because the quarrel between the deniers and their critics turns, in many cases, precisely on the role of naturalism in rational explanation. But perhaps it was too much to expect that Williams could resolve that fierce and knotty quarrel. His failure to do so does make *Truth and Truthfulness* something of a disappointment, given the goal it initially sets for itself. Yet it seems a bit churlish to criticize him for not achieving this very ambitious goal when he has given us so much wisdom and insight, throughout his career and as much as ever in this last, fascinating book on a topic—as always, with Williams—of vast and enduring importance.

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Woodruff, Paul. *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. 248. \$22.00 (cloth); \$11.95 (paper).

“A man’s got to know his limitations,” Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry Callahan once remarked (*Magnum Force*, 1973). A sense of limitations is perhaps especially important, but especially underappreciated, in contemporary American life, where competitive market behavior and a kind of Promethean optimism of character predominate. In philosophy, the importance of limitations is a thought that it is hard to formulate and defend within the frameworks of maximization-oriented utilitarian policy studies, economic rational preference theory, or the kind of Kantianism that stresses purity of intention alone.

Paul Woodruff’s central aim, in this decent, humane, and generous book, is to remind us of the importance of the acceptance of limitations in moral and, especially, political life. “Reverence,” he tells us, “begins in deep understanding of human limitations” (p. 5). This deep understanding is centrally embodied in feelings. “Reverence is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have” (p. 8). It is “to be defined as a capacity for certain feelings” (p. 53), not as a matter of belief. Without these feelings, ceremonies become empty of significance; human life becomes more wholly animal (e.g., meals become feeding times and homes become kennels [p. 19]); common enterprise collapses into egoist grasping; and

shared civil, deliberative life gives way to faction and manipulation. In general, “without reverence, things fall apart” (p. 13).

In our present condition, according to Woodruff, “we are losing the idea of reverence” (p. 36). Reverence persists as a matter of feeling in certain pockets of familial, civic, and religious life; it is “an ancient virtue that survives among us in half-forgotten patterns of civility, in moments of inarticulate awe, and in nostalgia for the lost ways of traditional cultures” (p. 3). But it is not articulately understood, and we are in danger of losing the feelings along with the idea. “What I am proposing is that we restore the idea of reverence to its proper place in ethical and political thought. We will be better off, I think, if we know what it is and why it matters. Only then can we consciously preserve and cultivate it as we run down the rapidly accelerating current of cultural change” (p. 38).

In developing his account of the nature and importance of reverence, Woodruff makes two important, related argumentative claims. First, only feelings have motivational force primitively. Rules, even moral rules, are such that people must be motivated to follow them, and the relevant motivation must come from feelings or what grows from feelings, not from the rules themselves. In short, there can be no stable and successful moral practice without the virtue of right feeling, including reverence. In particular, “justice has very little motivational power. It is a fairly dry virtue, guided more by judicious thought than by trained feeling, . . . [and it] is not a motivational restraint” (p. 174). Hence virtue ethics is properly more fundamental than talk of moral rules and the right distribution of goods and powers, though that talk will have its place (pp. 62–63).

Second, “reverence has more to do with politics than with religion” (p. 4). Plato’s claim that justice is sufficient for all the reverence you need is false, and we should in contrast prefer the wisdom of Thucydides, who praised reverence as a moral virtue, quite apart from any belief in particular gods (p. 11). Woodruff illustrates his conception of reverence as a distinctly political virtue with chapters on “The Reverent Leader” and “The Silent Teacher.” In each case, the central point is that reverence for shared ideals is the only thing that can bind together leaders and followers, and teachers and students, in a common practical enterprise pursued with mutual trust, as opposed to self-seeking and cynicism.

Reverence is a matter of “remembering what it is to be human” (p. 79) or of “remembering your humanity” (p. 88), not a matter of belief in any particular gods. Hence it is possible to have “Reverence across Religions” (p. 135) and “Reverence without a Creed” (p. 117), and Woodruff undertakes to “trace reverence back to cultures that have religions very different from modern ones” (p. 135), including Confucianism, Jainism, and ancient Greek religions of blood sacrifice, as well as to find it expressed in the nonreligious poetry of Tennyson and Philip Larkin. It is true, Woodruff concedes, that, in order to be reverent, “you must believe that there is one Something that satisfies at least one of the following conditions: it cannot be changed or controlled by human means, is not fully understood by human experts, was not created by human beings, and is transcendent” (p. 117). “True reverence . . . cannot be for anything that we humans make or control” (p. 28). But this condition can be satisfied by objects as diverse as various gods, various traditions, nature (the starry heavens above), family life, and harmonious order, understood as self-subsistent and partially exemplified in different ways in different regions of human life. Hence reverence

can exist across different specific traditions and across differences of specific religious belief. It is, as Woodruff might have put it, the metavirtue of being virtuous or of having a character that is not wholly appetitive and grasping, and it is the best, and perhaps the only ultimate, check against violence. "If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent" (p. 15).

Woodruff has, as indicated, a very broad or very weak conception of appropriate objects of reverence. This conception enables him to be strikingly ecumenical toward varieties of appropriately reverent characters, traditions, and doxastic stances. His emphasis falls on reverence as a morally significant attitude and capacity of feeling. In contrast, he offers nothing really in the way of significant epistemology, theology, or metaphysics. As a result, *Reverence* is, while decent, humane, and generous, more than a little homiletic in character. I am inclined to think that its central claims may be both true and important but that they receive substantially less argument than is needed in order wholly to defend them.

One way to see the problem is to consider hard cases. Consider, for example, a clash between environmentalists, who express reverence for an old growth forest, and townspeople, who express reverence for their settled way of life that depends on logging. (Woodruff discusses this case on pp. 22–25.) What is one to say in the face of such a dispute between opposed reverential attitudes with opposite objects? Should the trees be logged or not? Once upon a time, idealist value theory, whether Platonic or Hegelian, would have addressed such disputes by drawing, putatively, on substantive knowledge of the Good or the Right that is possessed by experts (Platonic guardians or Hegelian members of the universal class). Woodruff, rightly, is too modest—epistemically, metaphysically, theologically, and morally—to claim politically relevant knowledge of the nature of the good. As a result he is left recommending only that each side should attempt to appreciate the reverential attitudes of the other (p. 25). But while mutual appreciation would certainly help, it will not by itself yield an outcome that everyone can endorse, and it is, to that extent, a disappointing recommendation. One can imagine a similar—and similarly disappointing—recommendation in favor of mutual appreciation directed toward both proponents of the legality of abortion (who revere womens' lives and civic life) and opponents (who revere, it is said, human life as such). And history is nothing if not the record of violent wars between adherents of different faiths, having opposed reverential attitudes toward different gods.

What mostly, of course, does step in to resolve practical disputes that involve opposed reverential attitudes is a combination of political will and force. What mostly should step in—it is arguable—is democratic procedure and a general commitment to respect democratically achieved outcomes. But why, exactly, is democratic procedure important? An answer that leaps to mind is that democratic procedure is the best way yet devised of expressing respect for rational agents. Hence there seems to be a unique importance attaching to respect for human beings as rational agents (ends in themselves). When serious political conflict is in view, we perhaps need more of this and more democratic procedures and not so much mutual appreciation for multiple and opposed reverential attitudes.

Can respect for rational agents and for democratic procedures be nurtured without drawing on centrally feeling-rooted attitudes of reverence? While Woodruff argues that it cannot, his case is not conclusive. Plato, Kant, and Hegel, as well as more recent theorists such as Raz and Scanlon, all have detailed accounts of how feelings, or at least belief-sensitive emotions, are open to substantial formation and restructuring on the basis of deliberative reasoning. Instead, then, of relying on a primitive, feeling-rooted attitude of reverence, perhaps we can and ought to rely on emotions of respect that are formed and sustained in substantial measure through deliberation and through awareness of the distinctive value of beings who can deliberate. Perhaps justice as an ideal—an ideal of a social order of fairness and mutual respect—has more motivational power than Woodruff supposes.

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