

## THE PROPHECY OF GEORGE GRANT

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George Parkin Grant, *English-Speaking Justice*, Sackville: Mount Allison University, 1974, pps. 112.

*English-Speaking Justice* continues George Grant's critique of liberalism. This critique views liberalism as a political philosophy within the context of technological society: "Over the last centuries, the most influential people in the English-speaking world have generally taken as their dominant form of self-definition a sustaining faith in a necessary interdependence between the developments of technological science and political liberalism" (pp. 2-3).

This faith has been supported by the evidence of history. English ideas and institutions have, generally speaking, nurtured political liberty. The English-speaking peoples have been able to convince themselves that their technology and their liberty went hand-in-hand. This conviction was reinforced by relative domestic stability and the growth of a great empire, founded by the British and inherited by the Americans. Because they believed that technology and liberty were linked, the leaders of the empire could feel that its spread would eventually be justified not only by material benefits to those being encompassed by it, but also by the political liberty that was surely to follow.

Grant wants us to give the truth in this understanding of modern history its due. There is something deserving of our respect in the degree of political liberty which has been developed and sustained in the successive heartlands of this empire. However, he also wants us to note that the liberalism expressed in English ideas and institutions is of only one variety. "Liberalism in its generic form is surely something that all decent men accept as good — 'conservatives' included" (p. 4). Grant wishes to distinguish English liberalism from at least two other ways of thinking about freedom. First, there is the classical tradition of Western political thought, with its roots in the Bible and Greek philosophy. This tradition, Grant holds, has its finest articulation in Plato's *Republic*. One purpose of *English-Speaking Justice*, and indeed of much of Grant's writing, is to persuade us to be open to this wisdom in our own day. Those, like Karl Popper, who would deny that this tradition holds political liberty as one of the central human goods receive some of Grant's sharpest barbs. Further, in our time freedom has come to be understood increasingly as an absolute human

good. This tendency has been thought through more thoroughly on the Continent than in the English-speaking world and most obviously by Marx and Nietzsche. Their influence — and that of others — has brought about intemperate and destructive politics. Grant reminds us that English-speaking liberalism has been largely immune from these misfortunes, and for that we should be grateful. This reminder is Grant's second purpose. The price of this, however, has been a shallowness in English liberalism — a failure to think seriously about the relationship between technology and justice. To warn us of the future to which this shallowness opens us is Grant's primary purpose.

Grant brings us, in his introduction, into the presence of some big questions. Looking at the modern crisis of liberalism he asks, "What were the modern assumptions which at one and the same time exalted human freedom and encouraged that cybernetic mastery which now threatens freedom?" (p. 10) Looking back to the theoretical roots of English liberalism he asks, "was the affirmation by those founders that justice is based on contract ever sufficient to support a politics of consent and justice?" (pp. 12-13) The book proceeds to suggest answers, but only at the cost of raising even more questions.

The answer Grant gives to the latter question appears in part II, the longest section of the book. It appears at first to be merely(!) an extensive review of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. It becomes clear, however, that Grant wants us not only to see the inadequacies of this most impressive monument to English-speaking liberalism, but also to trace its deficiencies to problems inherent in the thought of Locke and Kant, Rawls's mentors. It is an ambitious and brilliantly executed project. Rawls himself is dispatched with relative ease. In fact, even a reading of the footnotes to this chapter will make it difficult for the reader to continue to be impressed by the book with which the current generation of philosophical ethicists seems, for the most part, to be enthralled. Grant's intention, however, is not to make light of Rawls, but to ponder his work as a particularly clear expression of the dominant morality.

The structure of his analysis is simple. Rawls is compared first with Locke, then with Kant. Rawls's intentions having been clarified through an analysis of both the continuities and discontinuities with his mentors, the critique is then brought to completion. Rawls stands in the English contractarian tradition of which Locke was a principal architect. In Rawls, as in Locke, justice cannot be based on some knowledge of man's highest good, for such knowledge is not to be had with certainty. In the face of such agnosticism, justice is grounded in the social contract. In Locke, however, the basis of this contract is the supposition that in the state of Nature — the way things are apart from the contract — life is far poorer. Therefore, it is mutually advantageous to enter into and abide by the contract. As in Locke, the ethical agent in Rawls's analysis is an adult calculator of interest. Rawls, however, being a modern philosopher who is aware of the "naturalistic fallacy," cannot ground his imperative on any

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supposed knowledge of the way things are. Therefore, he introduces in its place the concept of the "original position," a concept completely abstracted from any particular time, place or circumstances.

The awareness of the "naturalistic fallacy," the radical distinction between empirical knowledge and moral reasoning, can be traced to Kant, the Continental philosopher most influential on modern English-speaking philosophy. Rawls describes his theory as "Kantian," and Grant is willing to concede that there is a strong resemblance between Rawls's understanding of justice as fairness and Kant's categorical imperative. Grant, however, insists that Rawls's appropriation of Kant is one-sided and distorted. For Kant, morality is the one fact of reason. For Rawls, there are no "facts" of reason, for reason is wholly instrumental. The entire metaphysical dimension of Kant is ignored, making nonsense of Rawls's use of the term "person" to account for the dignity of the individual.

Having shed all traces of the ontology or metaphysics of his mentors, except for the mysterious recourse to the concept of "person," Rawls offers a notion of justice which shines forth as a contractarian liberalism purged of any remnants of the classical tradition in which justice is understood ontologically, as that for which man is fitted. Rawls's principles call for a unity of individual liberty with an increasingly realised substantive equality, overcoming the arbitrary deficiencies of nature and the historically accidental inequalities of society. As Grant puts it, Rawls has articulated "American progressivist common sense" (p. 42). Grant wants us to note, however, that this philosophy makes sense only when abstracted from the realities of the social order. These realities include the power of private and public corporations, modern warfare and imperialism. When we attempt to think of this abstract liberalism together with these technological realities, fundamental questions emerge. Can the content of justice be derived from the calculation of self-interest? When what Rawls calls the "primary goods" (Grant refers to them as "the cozy pleasures") are the only self-evident goods, what sort of regime will seem most appropriate to their pursuit? Finally: "Is justice pursued because of convenience, even when the calculation is in terms of an account of self-interest reached in abstraction from any knowledge of the way things are as whole? Is such justification of justice able to support the pursuit of liberty and equality at a time when the conveniences of technology do not seem to favour them?" (p. 50) By the time Grant has led us to these questions, they have become nearly rhetorical.

Even if one considers that liberalism seemed self-evidently valid through its connection with an expanding empire and several generations of relative domestic tranquility, one wonders how it is that contractual liberalism, so painfully lacking in adequate foundations, has been sustained as the dominant morality of the English-speaking world. If the account of justice is so inadequate in liberal thought, to what can one attribute the potency of

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English-speaking justice? Grant replies: "This can only be comprehended in terms of the intimate and yet ambiguous co-penetration between contractual liberalism and Protestantism in the minds of generations of our people" (pp. 61-2). The story of this co-penetration, as told by Grant, takes shape as follows.

In England, Calvinist individualism was readily blended with capitalism, and contractualism provided both a political and philosophical expression of that blending. Further, the positivism of the Calvinist approach to divine revelation blended just as easily with the forms of thought in modern science. In the United States, where Protestantism was even more unflinching and less thoughtful in its struggle with the wilderness, the blending was even more thorough. The liberalism of the secular realms depended on this Protestantism for its "moral bite" (p. 65), but the blending process altered both ingredients. The deeper the co-penetration, the more Protestantism became limited to secularized forms, and the less it could contribute toward sustaining a sense of justice as more than convenience.

Protestantism was thus finally laid to rest as a shaper of public life, but not before it had bequeathed to our culture an understanding of both God and man in terms of will. Freedom thereby came to be understood as autonomy; this understanding is both the gift and the nemesis of Calvinism. It was in this climate that Kant found his way into the hearts of English-speaking intellectuals. "He offered them a Protestantism purified of superstitions and open to progress" (p. 70). Thus, Grant argues, the memory of the eternal ground of justice preserved by the Protestant interpretation of Biblical religion kept alive an openness to the claims of justice in a contractarian social order until it too was absorbed by the emerging technological ethos. Even then, Kantian thought helped delay the raising of unanswerable questions about contradictions between technology and justice, as Nietzsche has shown.

Grant concludes: "This combination of the public successes of liberalism with these memories and hopes inhibited the thought which asks if justice is more than contractually founded, and whether it can be sustained in the world if it be considered simply a chosen convenience. The very decency and confidence of English-speaking politics was related to the absence of philosophy" (pp. 72-3). The delay could not last forever. In the final part of the book Grant lays before us the issue in which liberalism "raises a cup of poison" (p. 75) to its own lips. The issue is abortion law, especially as it can be seen in the *Roe vs. Wade* decision of the United States Supreme Court. "In that decision one can hear what is being spoken about justice in such modern liberalism more clearly than in academic books which can be so construed as to skim questions when the theory cuts" (p. 74).

Liberalism, we may recall, claims no knowledge of any good higher than the individual's calculation of self-interest. In *Roe vs. Wade*, however, the majority opinion does introduce ontological considerations. That is, the judges make a

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distinction between members of the same species. The interests of one — an adult calculator — are to be protected by law; the interests of another — a fetus — are not. By making this distinction, the court exposes the contradiction in the dominant morality, a contradiction between justice and convenience. If rights are reduced to the convenience of calculators, and the human species is simply a historical (thus contingent) concept, why should we be just?

From this point, Grant's analysis runs swiftly to its conclusion. The contradiction is not only in the English-speaking world; it permeates Western civilisation. The content of justice for us has been based on an understanding of what man is fitted for. That content, as well as its form, is being challenged by a technological society which tells us that whatever is — including mankind — is ruled by necessity and chance. From within the framework of modern thought, a matrix of contractual liberalism and technological instrumentalism, we simply are not able to think justice together with the truths that have arisen through technology. They cannot be understood as part of the same whole. Nietzsche, who did think through the contradictions of our world, told us that God is dead and that reality is historical. Integrity, in this situation, is to be sought in the exercise of will.

Grant's penultimate conclusion is startling. The English-speaking world still has a heritage of constitutional government, he reminds us, and it protects us against ideological folly. Further, North American pluralism continues to provide fertile ground for religious revivals. No matter how attenuated the faith which they nurture, some memory of the eternal ground of justice will be thereby supported. Liberalism, in other words, is in some ways the best political philosophy available. Criticism of it should be articulated prudently.

In any case, however, justice is bound to decline. The majority will trust technology for the "primary goods," and will prefer equality in these to justice in any other sense. In the resulting regime there will be inequality of liberty for the weak — those less able to calculate. Further, justice will have less and less to do with the character of persons. The widening rift between the inward and the outward life will sink both religion and politics deeper into what others have called privatization. The nature and reality of justice will tend to become increasingly dark to us. The English-speaking people in this situation have the practical advantage of "the old and settled legal institutions which still bring forth loyalty from many of the best practical people" (p 95). Compounding matters further is our tradition of contempt for our philosophical heritage, and for thought itself. For this reason we are ill-equipped and unlikely to lighten the darkness which is now descending.

A question which needs to be raised about this book is suggested by an apparent inconsistency of language in the concluding paragraphs. Grant has been leading us to see contractual liberalism as a political philosophy which claims to unite the substance of justice with the pursuit of technological

progress, but which is finally inadequate to that task. In his concluding three paragraphs, Grant says three things about the relationship between justice and technology. First, there is the call to those who still somehow know that justice is what we are fitted for "to understand how justice can be thought together with what has been discovered of truth in the coming to be of technology" (p. 92). However, a great darkness surrounds in this situation, since the account of justice to which Plato's *Republic* and the Christian Gospels bear witness "cannot be thought in unity with what is given in modern science concerning necessity and chance" (pp. 93-94, emphasis mine). Only a few sentences later, however, the heart of that darkness is that "this account *has not* been thought in unity with the greatest theoretical enterprises of the modern world" (p. 94, emphasis mine). Now the first of these two claims would appear to be the stronger. Yet, Grant has convinced me that the latter is the case — and his own writing is one of the reasons I doubt the former.

Is Grant simply inconsistent, weaseling out of a too harsh conclusion by covering it with a milder one? Or is he confused in his purpose, having come to realize that the truth he set out to tell us is one which ought not to be told? My own judgement would be that the inconsistency is only apparent, a consequence of the prophetic character of his writing. If justice and technology *have not* been thought together, who can say with conviction that they *can* be? Yet Grant's prophecy (since real prophecy is always somewhat ecstatic) may apply to his own thinking as well. Perhaps the hidden consistency in the penultimate paragraph lies behind Grant's assumption that Plato's *Republic* is the most adequate philosophical exposition of the Biblical account of justice. Perhaps the Platonizing of the Christian tradition, which partially subverted even the attempt of St. Thomas Aquinas to do theology in an Aristotelian key, is part of that which makes the present intellectual task appear impossible.

One can agree with Grant in concluding: "It is folly simply to return to the ancient account of justice as if the discoveries of the modern science of nature had not been made. It is folly to take the ancient account of justice as simply of antiquarian interest, because without any knowledge of justice as what we are fitted for, we will move into the future with a 'justice' which is terrifying in its potentialities for mad inhumanity of action" (p. 94). One can even agree that the *Republic* is the most "beautiful" expression of that ancient account, without agreeing that it is the truest or most illuminating in our present darkness. For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer has argued that Aristotle can help contemporary hermeneutics surmount the impasses of historicism. Perhaps the more pluralistic account of justice given in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* would prove fruitful if more seriously considered.

Further, the clarity of Aristotle's distinction between the theoretical and practical sciences might make the modern task more manageable than it appears to Grant. He remarks, in the same penultimate paragraph, that, "For

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those of us who are lucky enough to know that we have been told that justice is what we are fitted for, this is not a practical darkness, but simply a theoretical one" (pp. 94-95). It is hard to understand what Grant might mean by this, unless he is thinking of justice as only a matter of the inner life. For to know what justice is, is not yet to do it. If Grant is right about the public realm being pre-empted by the language of liberalism, and I believe he is, then the doing of justice will involve a reopening of the public realm to the language of justice. Until we find a way to do this, our darkness will surely be a practical one. On this point the account of Hannah Arendt, who argued in *The Human Condition* that our modern incapacity is primarily a failure of our power of action as the Greeks understood that power, is more penetrating if not more reassuring than that of Grant. A recovery of the Aristotelian sense of the practical (which is definitely not the same as the modern use of the term "praxis") commends itself as a step toward the reopening of the public realm.

In *Lament for a Nation*, Grant argued that Canadian nationalism is impossible in the North American empire. A paradoxical result of the book was a revival of Canadian nationalism. It is fascinating to see the possibility of equally surprising results coming from *English-Speaking Justice*. For, although the circulation will be far smaller, the searching is far deeper and the prophecy is far darker than in the earlier book. However, if justice truly is what we are fitted for, if it really does have a grounding in the way things are, then we may reasonably hope that Grant's message will receive the hearing it deserves.

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