

Paul WOODRUFF. *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*. London: Oxford University Press, 2014. 306 pp.

Paul Woodruff's book on reverence is an unusual book on an unusual subject that (barely) "survives among us in half-forgotten patterns of civility [...] and in nostalgia for the lost ways of traditional cultures" (1). In fact, a more fashionable subject could be 'irreverence.'

A distinguished scholar with a proven record in ancient Greek philosophy and literature, however, Woodruff wrote this book that he himself "never expected to write" (7), transforming a footnote on Thucydides' attitude in a study of 'Greek humanism' into a full book-length text. That is, according to the author, how a book that was not on the cards was first published in 2001, and in 2014 became a pocket book of Oxford Press on an ancient virtue. This new edition is released with two new chapters, "Sacred Things" (chapter 10) and "Compassion" (chapter 12).

Woodruff wanders easily and speedily through moderns from Nietzsche (59, 161-162, etc.) to Amartya Sen (15), and especially through the ancients, freely quoting not only Thucydides (see especially 136-138; 177-183), but also Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Euripides' *Bacchae*, Plato's *Crito* (20), *Theaetetus* (50), *Gorgias* (79), or *Protagoras* (144; 146-147), Sophocles' *Ajax*, not to mention Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, showing a boldness in interpretation that borders on carelessness (199).

But let us not mislead the reader. This scholar meets a wide audience with a wonderful and very readable book, and not just the usual academic suspects. The author seems even to aim at influencing the advisors of today's democratic princes or citizens. The text itself is an odd mix of old and modern poetry (Kipling 28; Yeats 31, etc.), quasi-catechism questions and answers (55-74), lessons taken from ancient Greek plays, ancient Chinese wisdom (less often and less compelling), present-day situations – some of them flat and even fashionable (13 and ff.; 209-211) and some of them very good and troubling (150-155). All in all, the text, as a text written down for such a large audience, nonetheless maintains a difficult balance between clarity and depth.

Woodruff states his main thesis in very simple terms: "reverence is our best defence against *hubris*" (xi). *Hubris* is a Greek word of difficult translation, roughly meaning something akin to arrogance (2; 203; 258; note to 86). Without reverence, religions will plunge believers into wars, and great powers will stumble (xi). Moreover, "*leaders are responsible for the compassion of the groups that follow them [... the]*" "most important message" of the whole book (198, italics original).

In the end, the book struggles to recover reverence as a forgotten virtue, which means in practice to overcome powerful prejudices against it: it implies reviving reverence, rescuing it from the religious right, and making it palatable to the secular left. Emphasis is added to the point that reverence neither equals nor even bears a strong correlation to religion: there is 'bare' reverence, that is, 'reverence without a creed', and there are religions that lack reverence. Appeal is made to perennial reverence across cultural boundaries and religions, drawing on two age old examples: ancient Greek poetry and philosophy (77-96) and Confucius's *Analects* (99-111, etc.).

Reverence, so unveiled, even stripped of any cultural garments, is a virtue for all seasons. As a virtue it is a moral “[...] capacity, cultivated by experience and training, to have emotions that feel like doing good things” (56) or “capacities for emotions” (183) that show themselves in three main manifestations (57ff.): sense of awe in the face of something higher than ourselves (other people, ideals, sacred things), sense of shame (a remedy for arrogance), and respect. Respect and ceremony – if they are understood in their original meaning (131) and not transformed into routines and chores (247-248) – reveal reverence, but should not be confused with it: ceremony is the language of (133), not the capacity for the feeling.

We could with good reason doubt that things are as simple as that: maybe all we can find in history or literature is reverence “[...] as it has been practiced in this or that traditional society” (53), and not outside any cultural framework. I am not suggesting that we discard the existence of such a thing as human nature or human condition, but rather that from the ‘text of man’ all we can ever find are the variations of the text; we cannot “lay bare” (54) the text.

This approach notwithstanding, Woodruff succeeds in avoiding the pitfall of relativism. Again, we could doubt that a “good relativist is hard to find” (145), as the author claims – a contention that seems almost naïve in a world where ‘everything goes’ (*sed contra* cf. 148) – even if we do not deny that full-fledged relativism is a fragile and difficult philosophical position (see the section on *Protagoras*, 51-54).

However, in spite of the scholarship and pleasure of reading through the book, some assertions certainly look odd and need revising or expanding, even for a non-academic audience. In some cases an interesting and controversial insight is dismissed in a couple of lines (for instance, in the judgment on the Athenian empire [177ff.] as something more than *bubris*), although it is impossible to avoid rushing through some of these interesting suggestions without enlarging the book beyond reason.

That said, some other assertions should not be presented without debate, since they go to the heart of the book. For example, the author makes the case for adding piety or reverence among the cardinal virtues (132). We may ask, however, whether it is so evident that “justice has very little motivational power” (183) in a world where struggles against injustice have long ago replaced loyalty to home and country; and whether “[...] generally, moral dilemmas are only skin deep [...] with always “a right way to get out of them” (153-154)?

The same applies to the very definition of virtue (despite the qualification: “definitions of virtue remain defeasible” [55]), presented in an unproblematic fashion as mere capacity for feeling. Moreover, Woodruff is familiar with all the controversies in defining virtue and is not necessarily endorsing Moore’s or MacIntyre’s moral theories; he is merely trying to simplify the case. He presents virtue as something that we aspire to achieve, as beauty of character (the Greek words *arête* and *kalon* certainly have these meanings). But his definition certainly seems shallow. It is very hard to accept the idea that virtue as conveyed by Greek tragedians and philosophers is just a capacity that makes you ‘feel like’ doing good things. This is not without consequence: this poor or vague articulation of virtue ends up in the dubious proposition that ethics based on

virtues rather than rules are more helpful because “rules are hard to separate from culture” while (we assume) virtues are not hard to separate from culture (154-155).

As for the general thesis, while I am inclined to grant the author the case that “irreverence” is “the plainest clue to tyranny” (174), the case for sundering reverence (or Roman piety) from religion looks much weaker. Indeed, Confucius has no creed and Greek myths (133) are not a creed. Greek piety (religion is a Latin ‘word’ and a Roman ‘thing’) was very important for the cohesion of the polis, and impiety a crime, but mythology was not a theology based on revelation. Herodotus famously claimed that very little would be known about the gods if it were not for Homer and Hesiod’s tales and genealogies. So in trying to make the case for reverence without a creed, taking two religions that lack one certainly amounts to arguing from the most favourable cases.

Fortunately, whatever the possible limitations or objections to the book’s main thesis, they do not undermine the wisdom of the book as a whole, nor the richness of its scholarship.

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