



## Notes on *Habits of the Heart*\*

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Rousseau takes us directly to the subject of *Habits of the Heart*. Speaking in the *Emile*, in Allan Bloom's fine edition, he describes a human type we know well:

Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. He will be one of these men of our days: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing.<sup>1</sup>

We recognize the type immediately because Rousseau holds up a mirror to American life. The bourgeois man whom he dismisses here as a creature with a divided soul is none other than today's middle class American citizen. This is the creature we see, in his twentieth century complexity, in the pages of this remarkable book by Bellah and his colleagues.

Be it noted that they are not dismissive, as Rousseau is. He and his descendants, among them Marx and the "New Left" of recent memory, find a disabling incoherence in the lives of bourgeois democrats. We are familiar with the bill of particulars: middle class Americans are neither free human beings nor good citizens. On the one hand, we observe their stupefying conformity to the mores of the American tribe and must finally conclude that somehow they lost their native freedom long ago. They enjoy freedom under our constitution and yet look like serfs as we see them bowing and scraping before the feudalities of the day. Consider for example Sinclair Lewis's George F. Babbitt, who is not as much of a caricature as we hope he is. Even he, it will be remembered, has moments of self recognition and longs to recover that native freedom: for years

\*Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. Pp. xiii, 355. \$16.95. *Habits of the Heart* has also been published in a paperback edition by Harper & Row: New York, 1986 (\$7.95). Its pagination is the same as that of the hardcover edition except in the Preface; and here references to the Preface of this edition are enclosed by parentheses.

<sup>1</sup>(New York: Basic Books, 1979) 40.

he has dreamed of leaving house and family behind and escaping romantically with an elfin girl who "discerned gallant youth" in him, "where others saw but Georgie Babbitt"; and he finally admits to his son that "I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life!" On the other hand, think of Babbitt's stunted patriotism, his narrow and intolerant view of American life

(e.g., “New York is cursed with unnumbered foreigners,” unlike such cities as Minneapolis (!) or his own Zenith, which “stand together for power and purity, and against foreign ideas and communism”). Civic booster though he is, he is so engrossed by getting and selling, by American “acquisitiveness,” that he is disabled from caring for our public life in a comprehensive way. He and his kind are poor citizens. They are citizens in name only, who lack the noble public-spiritedness on which republics depend: how can the “public things” be left to their care? In fact, they are private creatures, rather than citizens: Babbitt is an *idiotes* in the original sense. We find a reflection of his essentially private life in the skyline of the city he celebrates, which is dominated by buildings that have a private instead of a public purpose: “the towers of Zenith” are “frankly and beautifully office buildings,” rather than either “citadels” or “churches” (comparisons abound: any of the walled cities of Europe, e.g., Lucca; or the skyline of Sir Christopher Wren’s London, as we now know it from Canaletto’s “London from the Terrace of Somerset House” of 1751, with St. Paul’s Cathedral and the “city churches” dominant). So it is just as Rousseau says: a creature such as Babbitt “will never be either man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others.”<sup>2</sup>

Is there a way out of the incoherence diagnosed by Rousseau? Bellah’s group conducted interviews with over two hundred Americans in the period between 1979 and 1984, talked with a number of them more than once, and observed many of them participating in the lives of their communities. The authors of *Habits of the Heart* did this in the manner of Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (the first part of which was originally published in 1835), but adapted the pattern of his inquiry to the circumstances of contemporary American life. “The fundamental question” that they asked these Americans and that they in turn were asked by them “was how to preserve or create a morally coherent life.”<sup>3</sup>

Their answer, growing out of this sustained conversation, is one that Tocqueville might have given, if he had observed the American scene today. He knew, and so do they, that the constitutionally protected freedoms enjoyed within a stable democratic regime are a rare human achievement. He saw the early promise of such a regime in the United States of America and argued that its well-being would depend on the integrity of the American family, the maintenance of its religious traditions, and its lively tradition of local politics. These three institutions are essential to the republican form of self government because they are the source of the habits and moral disciplines that make good citizens: that is to say, they are seminaries of civic virtue.

But Tocqueville also observed that a certain kind of “individualism” would endanger the sound constitution of American life, if it were to run its course and the “sovereign individual,” to use a distinction of Leo Strauss’s,

<sup>2</sup>Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: New American Library, 1961) 6, 319, 151, 5.

<sup>3</sup>*Habits of the Heart* (hereafter *Habits*), ix, (viii), 297-298, vii.

were to replace the “conscientious individual.”<sup>4</sup> One of the major themes of *Habits of the Heart* is a rich commentary on Tocqueville’s warning; and its readers will have good cause to wonder, along with the Bellah group, about the individualism that “might eventually isolate Americans one from another and thereby undermine the conditions of freedom.” This is “ontological individualism,” defined in a useful Glossary as “a belief that the individual has a primary reality whereas society is a second-order, derived or artificial construct.” Consider as an example of it

“Ted Oster,” a California lawyer whom they interviewed. He thinks of life as “a big pinball game,” full of rapid and unexpected changes, in which each of the players tries to coax and bend the rules to serve self interest. Oddly enough, he has been married a long time, a fact that he has difficulty explaining. Small wonder that he does. He knows only one language, his native tongue, the language of American politics. It has become the one by which utilities are calculated and through which rights are claimed. But he does not know the language of duty and loyalty, still bequeathed to some Americans by the biblical and republican traditions, which is a foreign tongue to him, though it is the language that would enable him to understand better than he does “his marriage as a community of memory and hope.”<sup>5</sup> Without this second language, Oster is bewitched by the immediacies of American speech. Like the slaves in Plato’s parable of the cave (*Republic*, Book VII), he knows only the sounds that now fill the American public space. He is an American troglodyte; and he has company.

Ted Oster has no “institutionalized religious or political commitments.” But what if he did? The Bellah group makes it clear that he might have remained equally confused about the corporate dimensions of our life, for both church and polity in our day are afflicted by the same language disease that he is, even to the extent of making way for alternatives that diminish or eliminate their own significance. If the extreme case is the most revealing case, then the religion of “Sheila Larson,” considered as “a perfectly natural expression of current American religious life,” makes the point. She named her religion after herself (“Sheilaism”):

I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.<sup>6</sup>

Her religion abstracts her not only from the church but from public things generally. Hers is “ontological individualism” with a religious gloss: “religion,” as so many mistaken Americans have been led to believe, “is a private matter.”

Strangely enough, there is a modern understanding of the polity itself that can be as radically private in consequences as the religion of Sheila Larson. John Locke helped to bring it to birth.<sup>7</sup> In his *Second Treatise of Government*, he begins by saying that if we are to understand politics “we must consider what state all

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<sup>4</sup>“Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time” in *The Post-Behavioral Era*, eds. George J. Graham, Jr., and George W. Carey (New York: David McKay, 1971) 222.

<sup>5</sup>*Habits*, vii,(vii), 234, 157, 77-78, 104-106, 178-179.

<sup>6</sup>*Habits*, 77, 221.

<sup>7</sup>Compare *Habits*, 143.

men are naturally in” (Chapter II); and he then describes this “state of nature” before analyzing the institutions of family, civil society, and government. Item: the human beings found in his state of nature are abstracted from these institutions and from whatever moral restraints might be nurtured by them. But they are not abstracted from acquisitiveness. First things first. Locke argues that human beings are thoroughly acquisitive creatures. We may ask what a government organized to serve this primary fact of human life would be like? It would be like our own, “the

first object of government” under our constitution being, as *Federalist* Number 10 puts it, “the protection of [the] different and unequal faculties of acquiring property.” Small wonder that citizenship in the service of a government thus understood tends not to enhance an understanding of the public good. Think again of George F. Babbitt. Small wonder either that the likes of Ted Oster are so illiberal. They spend their lives chasing the phantasms set loose by John Locke (he speaks of the pursuit of “property,” which in the formulation of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence becomes “the pursuit of happiness”); and they imagine themselves “realistic” in doing so. Their years in college and professional school do not liberate them from prejudice, which means that they are not liberally educated. Does this mean that they are slaves? This is a question that readers of Luther’s *On the Bondage of the Will* can ask.

Yet to say only this much about church and polity in America is not to say enough, for each of them also bears its own tradition of public-spiritedness, namely, the biblical tradition and the tradition of classical republicanism, which have shaped languages that better comprehend the public dimension of our lives than does the language of utility and self interest. *Habits of the Heart* reminds us of these traditions and their enduring importance in American politics. This is its other major theme. Its authors find traces of the republican ideal of the independent citizen in representative figures of our day: the “concerned citizen,” the civic volunteer, and the political activist. Their portraits of such Americans help to balance the analysis of the pathological side of American individualism. In part, their book is a restatement of the republican ideal for today, and especially for those of its representatives who are amnesiacs, historically speaking.<sup>8</sup>

The Bellah group makes a similar argument about the biblical tradition. Just as the republican tradition is the cure for the pathologies of individualism, the biblical tradition is the cure for the self-absorption of a Sheila Larson, for other forms of aberrant “religious individualism,” and for those churches that do not look beyond themselves. According to *Habits of the Heart*, the major Protestant churches have appropriated this tradition in their attempts “to develop a larger picture of what it might mean to live a biblical life in America,” further, that “they have tried to relate biblical faith and practice to the whole of contemporary life—cultural, social, political, economic—not just to personal and family morality.” Here again the authors show the vitality of this tradition in their portraits of various Americans and their congregations. Congregations and established churches are important in the argument of this book: “a vital and enduring religious individualism can only survive in a renewed relationship with established religious bodies,” in which “churches and sects would have to

<sup>8</sup>*Habits*, 27-51.

learn that they can sustain more autonomy than they had thought, and religious individualists would have to learn that solitude without community is merely loneliness.”<sup>9</sup>

Along the lines suggested here, Bellah and his colleagues hope that *Habits of the Heart* will help us to transform our “inner moral debate” over the question of “a morally coherent life...into public discourse,” into a public philosophy. They aim at nothing less than a reconstitution of political philosophy in America.<sup>10</sup> They surely do help us to recover a sense of the complexity of American public life. It is easy enough to fall into the habit of thinking of our public life as involving only what we learn of it from the news of the day: elections, legislative politics, diplomacy, domestic violence, war, the occasional high drama of a Supreme Court

decision, the rituals of the presidency. And there is an unduly restrictive political science ready at hand to confirm us in this habit. The Bellah group finds a more comprehensive alternative in Tocqueville: he argues that a study of America must begin with a study of its social condition because, once that condition has taken shape, “it may...be considered as the prime cause of most of the laws, customs, and ideas which control the nation’s behavior.”<sup>11</sup> The result of following his procedure is their richly elaborated tapestry of American life, one that draws together matters that usually are treated separately in the academy. There are of course hazards in this bolder approach. For example, our authors seem to speak as if the “republican tradition” or “classical republicanism” were a single, undifferentiated thing. But the differences between the republicanism of the Greek political philosophers and the “extended republic” of Publius, in which commerce prevails (*Federalist* Number 10), are great indeed and not only as regards size—so much so that it is possible to speak of the American transformation of republicanism. In our republic, if that is what it still is, the civic virtue that is cardinal in classical republicanism coexists uneasily with the prevalence of commerce, as has been known from the beginning.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup>*Habits*, 233-235, 237, 248.

<sup>10</sup>*Habits*, vii, (vi), 297-307. This complicated task is the subject of William M. Sullivan’s *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), which can be read with profit as a companion volume to *Habits of the Heart*.

<sup>11</sup>*Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Meyer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969) 50.

<sup>12</sup>The American redefinition of republicanism is a theme of Martin Diamond’s work. See for example “The Federalist” in *History of Political Philosophy*, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Second Edition; Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972) 631-651, and *The Founding of the Democratic Republic* (Itasca, Illinois: F. E. Peacock, 1981) 61-110, the latter originally meant for introductory students. Also see Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1959) 290-292; Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), and now David F. Epstein, *The Political Theory of “The Federalist”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). It is remarkable that William Sullivan discusses republicanism throughout his book but does not take account of Diamond’s fruitful work on the subject, one effect of which is to remind us of the difference between the republicanism of Publius and the republicanism of Rousseau, as well as of the enduring importance of the American constitutional forms that preserve the difference. As for *Habits of the Heart*, it concentrates more on the matter than the form of American life and so does not attempt to assess the value of these forms and seems unaware of this difference. Some of the distinctions touched on in these comments are clearly described by George H. Sabine in “The Two Democratic Traditions,” *Philosophical Review*, LXI (1952), 451-474. And they are essayed magisterially by Leo Strauss in “The Three Waves of Modernity” in *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill/Pegasus, 1975), 81-98.

There is another sense in which our authors help us to recover complexity. We sometimes find America viewed in essentially these terms: it is the first “new nation,” derived from principles of politics that are distinctly modern; and since those principles, originating in the work of Machiavelli, are entirely secular, the United States of America is entirely secular and united as a body only by the economic self-interests of its citizens. This view has become influential in the American academy, perhaps because the academy is by now largely secular. In any case, it is a view that discounts the biblical tradition as a vestige of the past, sometimes by arguing that modernity is secularized biblical faith, and that knows not what to do with the civic virtue of the republican tradition, except to treat it as an historical artifact. However, by showing both the importance and continuing vitality of these traditions, the Bellah group allows us to

wonder if the contemporary academic view doesn't tell us more about the academy than about American practice. Unlike the abstractness of this academic view, one excellence of *Habits of the Heart* is that it shows respect for Americans by beginning with their opinions and practices. We also find this virtue in Aristotle's political science.

Our authors raise questions about the modern age. They place their interpretation of America within the broader context of their remarks about the origins and development of modernity. Originating in the name of freedom as a great revolt against authority and tradition, modernity itself has become an authoritative tradition. According to *Habits of the Heart*, the modern experiment has moved ever more in the direction of incoherence and fragmentation, at every level of our life. At the social level it has "become clear that every social obligation [is] vulnerable, every tie between individuals fragile." This fragility is reflected in the instability of politics, both domestically and internationally, with "ideological fanaticism and political oppression [having] reached extremes unknown in previous history." The fragmentation of intellectual life, to continue, is visible in the curriculum of the contemporary university; and never mind the imbecilic attempts to recover a "core curriculum," which are "more symptomatic of our cultural fracture than of its cure." As for popular culture, we have only to think of the discontinuities of television—the "television style is singularly abrupt and jumpy"—to know that it too is fragmented. Even worse, we find it "hard to envision a way out of the impasse of modernity" because we are children of the age: "when the world comes to us in pieces, in fragments, lacking any overall pattern, it is hard to see how it might be transformed."<sup>13</sup>

But are we simply children of the age? No, we are not, to the extent that our lives are shaped by those "communities of memory" that aim "in a variety of ways to give a qualitative meaning to the living of life, to time and space, to persons and groups." Such communities, given the modern incoherencies just noted, in effect teach us how to ask questions about modernity and thus to find our way out of its quandaries. This is one of the senses in which, as our authors observe, "the battles of modernity are still being fought." And since on the analysis of *Habits of the Heart*, the church is a community of memory, we are led to the novel conclusion that it is the critic of modernity but not its slave. This

<sup>13</sup>*Habits*, 276, 277, 279, 277.

conclusion will enjoy the support it deserves if we remember that the church is not only a community of memory but also, and more specifically, a community of repentance. The academy can also be a community of memory, wherever and whenever "somehow, the tradition [of our common culture] does get transmitted, at least to students who seek it out."<sup>14</sup> Drawing together what Bellah and his colleagues have said about these two communities of memory, we are led to an even more novel conclusion, namely, that if the church college is mindful of itself, it can represent well the alternative toward which their analysis of American life and the perils of the day directs us.\*

<sup>14</sup>*Habits*, 282, 276, 295.

\*For another viewpoint on *Habits of the Heart* see the review by Norma Everist, below, p. 484.