

## 5 | “Ozzie and Harriet” Morality

### *Resetting Liberal Democracy’s Moral Compass*

Disorder and chaos were spiraling Jacksonian America into a whirlwind of change when Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont stepped onto U.S. shores in 1831. Universal white manhood suffrage, immigration, urbanization, and early industrialization were driving economic and political transitions that also transformed the family from a social institution shaped by European aristocracy into one fitting American democracy. Equality, Tocqueville observed, essentially dismantled the hierarchical aristocratic family to the degree that “in America the family, if one takes the word in its Roman and aristocratic sense, no longer exists.”<sup>1</sup> Tocqueville links the family to broader political change as he declares that “democracy which destroys or obscures almost all social conventions and . . . makes it harder for men to establish new ones, leads to a complete disappearance of almost all the feelings originating in such conventions.”<sup>2</sup> The egalitarian family evokes deep concerns for Tocqueville, since, freed from this mooring of social convention, democracy could drift toward an abyss of disorder. Alternatively, Tocqueville saw separate spheres for public man and private woman as the force necessary to meet this threat by effectively preserving the natural equality and economic efficiency necessary for social order and prosperity. “The Americans,” Tocqueville claims, “do not think

that man and woman have the duty or right to do the same things, but they show an equal regard for the part played by both and think of them as beings of equal worth, though their fates are different.”<sup>3</sup>

This separate spheres approach informs contemporary backlash politics. Communitarians, in particular, often redeploy Tocqueville’s view of the American family in their efforts to reset America’s moral compass back to the 1950s and what I call “Ozzie and Harriet” morality. The popular 1950s *Ozzie and Harriet* television show illustrates the separate spheres occupied by Ozzie Nelson and his wife, Harriet. Wearing a lovely dress, heels, and pearls, Harriet prepares breakfast before sending her husband off to work and her two sons, Ricky and David, off to school. These two clean-cut young men encounter various teenage problems and ultimately require their father’s guidance, which centers on a conventional moral code and resolves Ricky’s and David’s dilemmas. Harriet, meanwhile, appears from time to time, cooking meals, cleaning the house, and occasionally getting into a marital situation with Ozzie that resolves happily by the show’s end. The Nelson family symbolizes the traditional heterosexual white two-parent middle-class family to which Americans should return, communitarians say, in order to reverse the nation’s moral decay as indicated by increased rates of divorce, single motherhood, teen pregnancy, and school violence. The 1950s, for leading communitarian Amitai Etzioni, represents “the model of the orderly society we lost, one in which virtues were well in place” and when Americans adhered to strong beliefs such as anticommunism, Christianity, family unity, sexual codes, and respect for authority.<sup>4</sup> “Ozzie and Harriet” morality here captures how the virtue-vice dualism channels Tocqueville’s separate spheres ideology into contemporary debates over the family that frame American women’s mass exodus from the kitchen to the workplace as the indicator of the nation’s moral demise.

For communitarians, the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s catalyzed America’s decline as excessive freedom, individualism, and a general disregard for moral tradition caused massive social upheaval and generated an identity-based politics that fragmented the common good. These societal changes destroyed the separate spheres ideology in which “the roles of men and women were relatively clearly delineated” and enforced by a society that “chastised” those who challenged these norms, stigmatizing unmarried women as spinsters and married women without children.<sup>5</sup>

Second wave feminism's attack on Traditional Womanhood as a relic of a repressive Victorian moral code enforcing female purity, chastity, and modesty "led quite a few Americans to a state of normless anarchy," which caused rates of divorce, single motherhood, and date rape on college campuses to increase dramatically.<sup>6</sup> "Traditional virtues," as a result, "lost much of their power, and no strong new shared values arose."<sup>7</sup> American women's return to Harriet Nelson's role in private life, the argument goes, will revive the female finite virtues nearly destroyed by the women's liberation movement. Resetting the moral compass to align with the separate spheres ideology described by Tocqueville as central to American democracy's success will enable American women to resume moral guardianship for the family and the common good.

Agreeing with the communitarians, Alasdair MacIntyre proclaims, "Morality today is in a state of grave disorder," when comparing contemporary liberal democracy with the Dark Ages before the Roman Empire fell.<sup>8</sup> According to MacIntyre, reordering democratic life requires a "thicker" conception of morality than that offered by John Rawls's "thin" moral premise in Kantian ethics, which advances justice as the first virtue. MacIntyre, alternatively, presents a multiple virtues position grounded in an Aristotelian view of a *telos*, or concept of human nature as having an end without which it cannot be determined, understood, or defined. America's moral decay, then, results from moral relativism replacing a *telos* that grants an understanding of the "good life" or *eudaimonia* achieved in the *polis* where the internal goods of practices, not external goods or rewards, motivate man's virtue or moral excellence. Contemporary liberalism locates political and moral life in a natural rights framework that reduces the "good life" to the individual pursuit of self-interest without interference from other people, communities, or traditions. Morality anchored in a *telos*, for MacIntyre, will provide the American people with virtue, a standard for making clear moral judgments and resolving political conflicts within a shared understanding of the "good life," which will generate multiple virtues to guide daily life as a community.

To mend liberal democracy's moral fabric, worn thin by the identity-based politics generated in the 1960s, these political theorists agree, requires reviving a moral tradition anchored in multiple virtues that orients the people toward a common good. The traditions on which

Alasdair MacIntyre, Amitai Etzioni, and William Galston draw function according to hierarchies that exclude most people and all women from political life and the creation of tradition. Gender neutrality veils a range of assumptions regarding women's unequal power, constraint, and exclusion. This chapter turns from the broad idea of tradition to the particulars of male and female virtue and vice in this multiple virtues position. A set of moral assumptions antithetical to women's full citizenship undermines these thinkers' claim to reenergizing civic engagement in liberal democracy by actually deflecting attention away from the people's active participation in it.

Positioning this multiple virtues argument in relationship to Tocqueville's depiction of male and female virtue and vice in *Democracy in America* creates an analytic space for considering how these moral assumptions shift attention away from democratic life. "Habitual inattention," Tocqueville states, "must be reckoned the great vice of the democratic spirit."<sup>9</sup> The gendered moral logic of the virtue-vice dualism functions to perpetuate a vision of democratic life predicated on a suspicion of active and sustained engagement in it. The "Ozzie and Harriet" morality advanced in contemporary backlash politics holds broader implications for American liberal democracy by turning attention toward the family and civil society and away from public life to resolve structural political problems. Habitual *attention* to politics, then, becomes devalued and a marker of suspect citizens.

## The Separate Spheres Paradox: Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*

Democratic despotism deeply concerned Tocqueville as he observed Americans' habitual inattention to politics. The scant amount of time spent on political issues made them susceptible to their passions and prompted hasty opinions. Habitual inattention perpetuates an insidious form of oppression in which the state softens and bends the wills of its citizens until "each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hard-working animals with the government as its shepherd."<sup>10</sup> As Americans, focused on individualistic concerns, conform to popular opinion when bothering with politics, the increase in the equality of conditions will, Tocqueville fears, result in a proportional loss of freedom. The tyranny

of the majority, which leads to democratic despotism, results when the force of equality overtakes freedom to raise conformity to the level of omnipotent power. The people then abandon reason for passion, majority for minority voices, and formal laws for mores. This "majority is invested with both physical and moral authority," Tocqueville explains, "which acts as much upon the will as upon behavior and at the same moment prevents both the act and desire to do it."<sup>11</sup> This form of tyranny, differing from that of traditional tyrants who rely on explicit physical force to control their people, results from an insidious power to control inner thought and external action. The people's habitual inattention to political life ultimately leads to liberal democracy's decay.

Analyzing male and female virtue and vice in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* reveals a paradox in the separate spheres position with important implications for women and democratic citizenship. Tocqueville fosters the very habitual inattention to politics that he fears will destroy democracy by defining what men and women do and why they do it in terms that devalue direct political engagement. This paradox emanates from the moral logic deeply embedded in the American political script, captured in Tocqueville's work, that shows how American women remain locked into *either* accepting their role as moral guardians of virtue *or* being held morally responsible for America's decline into vice and eventual acquiescence to democratic despotism. This dualism creates the tenuous moral context for women's suspect citizenship. The separate spheres paradox illustrates how women's political identity as moral guardians but suspect citizens confines the American people to a thin conception of citizenship antithetical to democracy's demands.

The virtue of courage characterizes Tocqueville's American men and women, who all struggle daily with the volatile changes accompanying nation building, whether pioneering the West or industrializing the East. Attributing this traditionally masculine virtue to women indicates the permeability of the sexual division of labor that facilitates transforming republican into democratic virtue in the American context. Tocqueville particularly admires the pioneer man and his wife for exhibiting courage when exchanging the luxury and safety of civilization for the deprivation and danger of the wilderness. Their motivations for doing so, however, differ. An unwavering commitment to her family motivates the pioneer woman. The pioneer man endures "for a time

the life of a savage in order to conquer and civilize the backwoods” to pursue his fortune in the West. Economic gain, not political ambition or patriotism, drive this pioneer and his Eastern counterpart alike.<sup>12</sup> Whether pioneers, businessmen, or wage laborers, Tocqueville’s American men possess the courage to face dangers inherent to a lifelong pursuit of wealth in a cyclical market economy.

This economic imperative also influences female courage marked by the capacity for endurance. Indicating this gendered dynamic, Tocqueville explains that “in no country of the world are private fortunes more unstable than in the United States. It is not exceptional for one man in his lifetime to work up through every stage from poverty to opulence and then come down again. American women face such upheavals with quiet, indomitable energy. Their desires seem to contract with their fortune as easily as they expand.”<sup>13</sup> This depiction illustrates Tocqueville’s admiration for female courage as an unwavering ability to stand up to adversity, enabling the American woman to endure the upheavals caused by the American man’s ongoing pursuit of wealth.

American women’s responsibility for the family provides them with a source of steadfast strength unavailable to men, who are carried on the tides of the market. Marriage, of course, establishes the family. This act, for Tocqueville’s American woman, demands perhaps her greatest courage, since “it is the very enjoyment of freedom that has given her the courage to sacrifice it without struggle or complaint when the time has come for that.”<sup>14</sup> Young American girls, unlike American men, sacrifice their freedoms when entering marriage. As wives, American women withstand whatever trials result from their husbands’ adventures, even the poverty faced by pioneer women. Tocqueville describes how the pioneer woman’s “want, suffering, and loneliness have affected her constitution but not bowed her courage.”<sup>15</sup> Such moral fortitude in the face of physical deprivation captures the spirit of courage in Tocqueville’s account of American women whose quiet strength of will sustains their families as a pillar of order amid chaos. Tocqueville identifies American men and women as possessing the courage needed to confront the challenges of building a nation. Male courage, however, derives from actively participating in the market that generates the very instability against which female courage acts as a countervailing force. Neither form of courage requires aggressive bravery in politics or on the battlefield,

since virtue arises either from the market or from the family, not from politics.

Differences in Tocqueville's account of male and female chastity exemplify the double burden of moral responsibility placed on American women, whose virtue, rather than their husbands', preserves marriage as the cornerstone of the family and the common good. Male chastity tempers the American man's mercurial spirit, regulating his habits enough to preserve domestic harmony since family disputes draw man's attention away from accumulating wealth. Public opinion cajoles American men into acting chastely. "To win the esteem of their fellows," Tocqueville states, Americans "are bound to conform to regular habits. In that sense one can say that it is a point of honor to be chaste."<sup>16</sup> Male chastity does not extend to sexual constraint. American men who visit prostitutes, according to Tocqueville, only engage in a minor vice that does not amount to a general failure of moral character or a threat to the common good.

Woman's chastity requires her sexual constraint, which, coupled with the finite female virtue of fidelity, bases her morality on sexual purity before marriage and the unfailing commitment to her spouse afterward. American women's association with religion, in contrast to the external honor motivating male chastity, gives them the internal strength of will to adhere to the female virtues of chastity and fidelity. The broader community, Tocqueville observes, places such importance on women's morality that American legislators legally protect female virtue by making rape, a crime judged by public opinion more severely than all others, punishable by death.<sup>17</sup> Women's chastity requires legal protection, then, since it preserves the family and the common good. This sexual double standard indicates how Tocqueville's Americans view women with suspicion by associating their failure to uphold the dictates of virtue with endangering democracy.

The disproportionate weight placed on male and female chastity reflects the burden of moral responsibility assigned to American women, which Tocqueville conveys in his account of the pioneer husband and wife. Upon meeting the pioneer husband, Tocqueville expresses near astonishment at the cold, methodical hospitality with which he is received. Yet he appreciates this pioneer who belongs "to that restless, calculating, and adventurous race of men who do with the utmost coolness

things which can only be accounted for by the ardor of passion.”<sup>18</sup> Rationality regulates his temperament enough to channel the pioneer’s energy into the difficult labors of frontier life, which demand passion to be disciplined by chastity.

This same trait evokes a romantic sense of loss when Tocqueville describes the pioneer woman. Before moving West, she received an American girl’s typical education that made “her morals . . . pure rather than her mind chaste,” which, he laments, tends “to make women chaste and cold rather than tender and loving companions of men.”<sup>19</sup> In an isolated log house where an entire family shares one room, Tocqueville still fails to see any intimacy between the pioneer husband and wife, whom he never describes in direct relationship to one another. Their chaste disposition, though rendering private life less charming, represents “a secondary evil, which should be faced for the sake of the greater good.”<sup>20</sup> American women, unlike men, give up their passions to satisfy the demands of the greater good, which establishes a double standard extending to men’s sexual desire that frees them from the double burden of moral responsibility for the broader community.

Hard work, the central finite male virtue, entails a level of pragmatism that transforms republican virtue into democratic honor and results in a comparatively thin male moral code. Tocqueville observes that “in a democratic society . . . where fortunes are small and insecure, everybody works and work opens all doors. That circumstance has made the point of honor do an about turn and set it facing against idleness.”<sup>21</sup> Americans honor men who, in the absence of inherited wealth, work incessantly to achieve fragile fortunes. Tocqueville reserves some respect for the Protestant work ethic driving America’s economic growth. Americans, however, decouple the work ethic from its religious origins to devote themselves to pragmatism and materialism, the key beliefs in the American man’s “new religion.” Financial gain, instead of receiving glory for serving God or the greater good, earns men honor, which Tocqueville defines as “nothing but this particular rule based on a particular state of society, by means of which a people distributes praise or blame.”<sup>22</sup> Honor, then, “is only effective in full view of the public, differing from sheer virtue, which feeds upon itself, contented with its own witness.”<sup>23</sup> Public opinion replaces internal religious or moral conviction as the factor determining the American male’s honor, which exposes his



personal character to the forces of conformity that promote the tyranny of the majority.

Men's participation in political and civic associations, as a result, becomes vital to protecting against these dangers to democracy by preserving the individual's everyday liberties that limit pressures to conform to public opinion. Civil associations, for Tocqueville, bind the nation together by joining men collectively for intellectual and moral reasons that allow their feelings and ideas to expand to encompass others. This sense of morality and community counters the individualism and materialism that cause many ills in the democratic body politic. Political associations derive from man's self-interest, which, on occasion, drives him to band together with others to secure government assistance. American men's relationship with the state remains conflicted. "The inhabitant of the United States," Tocqueville explains, "learns from birth that he must rely on himself to combat the ills and trials of life; he is restless and defiant in his outlook toward the authority of society and appeals to its power only when he cannot do without it."<sup>24</sup> Political engagement represents a last resort for American men, who define themselves in terms of self-reliance and independence from governing authority.

Politics serves an instrumental means to American men's economic ends. "The passions that stir the Americans most deeply are commercial and not political ones," Tocqueville observes. "One must go to America to understand the power of material prosperity over political behavior, and even over opinions."<sup>25</sup> Politics transforms into a business that fulfills the pragmatic purpose of maintaining the order necessary for economic prosperity. Men's moral worth in this context depends on their financial success rather than contributing to the nation's common good. The male finite virtues of courage, chastity, and hard work reflect how American men achieve moral status by turning their attention toward economic matters and away from political or civic concerns. Habitual inattention, the vice that Tocqueville saw as most destructive to democracy, results from a view of political engagement as an instrumental obligation necessary to achieve individual material goals.

Framing political participation as an obligation deserving habitual inattention grants American men the power to exercise privileged irresponsibility toward politics. Tocqueville's American men possess the capacity to temper individualism enough to act with an awareness of

the broader community, which can motivate them to join civic and political associations. “The doctrine of self-interest properly understood,” Tocqueville explains, “does not inspire great sacrifices, but every day it prompts some small ones.” This capacity lacks a vision of the common good and “by itself it cannot make a man virtuous, but its discipline shapes a lot of orderly, temperate, moderate, careful, and self-controlled citizens. If it does not lead the will directly to virtue, it establishes habits which unconsciously turn it that way.”<sup>26</sup> “Self-interest properly understood” entails a rational calculus in which American men assess when, how, and to what degree small everyday sacrifices may benefit the community and, as a result, their self-interest. American men can then exercise privileged irresponsibility toward matters disconnected from their immediate self-interest such as the nation’s common good.

Representative democracy structurally contributes to a citizenry’s ability to exercise such a privilege and neglect the daily business of politics since responsibility for this work falls to elected officials. American men, given their instrumental view, conflate politics with business, which leads to bribery of politicians and a view of government as corrupt and vice-ridden.<sup>27</sup> Politicians deserve no honor because of their lack of virtue and dedication to a sphere narrowed to serving economic interests. Political participation for its own sake loses moral value, which enables American men to justify exercising the privilege of irresponsibility in determining when politics deserves their attention. Such habitual inattention perpetuates sporadic participation and ill-informed opinions and conflates economic with political issues. Devaluing political activity for its own sake jeopardizes the people’s participation in their government, which places democratic citizenship under suspicion.

American men’s privilege to exercise irresponsibility for the common good derives from American women’s self-sacrifice, the infinite moral virtue that allows them to assume responsibility as the nation’s moral guardians. The pioneer wife, for Tocqueville, embodies this unlimited capacity for self-sacrifice. Abandoning her youth, lifestyle, and personal interests for a pioneer’s hard life requires absolute devotion to her marital duties. The pioneer wife literally transfers her physical strength to her children to the extent that “one might think that the life she has given them exhausted her own, and yet she does not regret what they have cost her.”<sup>28</sup> Never communicating regret or suffering, this woman possesses

a peaceful angelic quality. "Her whole physiognomy bore marks of religious resignation," Tocqueville describes, "a deep peace free from passions, and some sort of natural, quiet determination which would face all the ills of life without fear and without defiance."<sup>29</sup> This "deep peace" acts as the pioneer woman's moral backbone that enables her to confront life's challenges with the active, though quiet, determination necessary to meet the ever-changing circumstances of frontier life.

A close affiliation with religion grants American women an infinite capacity for self-sacrifice, which leads Tocqueville to attribute great political importance to them as the guardians of the nation's common good. Men's focus on material, economic matters rendered religion "powerless to restrain them in the midst of innumerable temptations which fortune offers."<sup>30</sup> The church, increasingly separated from the state in American democracy, moves into the female private sphere where religion "reigns supreme in the souls of women." The American wife conveys religious morality to her family and her husband, who "derives from his home that love of order which he carries into affairs of state."<sup>31</sup> Women secure the moral order by exercising the restraint necessary to counterbalance the instability and freedom of liberal democratic life.

Female virtue acquires an infinite civic dimension through American women's responsibility for mores (*moeurs*). For Tocqueville, this term references "the habits of the heart, but also to the different notions possessed by men, the various opinions current among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits . . . the whole moral and intellectual state of a people."<sup>32</sup> This expansive dimension represents the common good that extends well beyond a nation's formal laws and constitutions and the material reality of each individual's life to join them together in a belief system that forms the democratic spirit. American women, charged with shaping the mores necessary to maintain public order and the common good, assume the double burden of moral responsibility for female private and male public life. Infinite moral and civic virtue add a heavy spiritual weight to the burden that transforms this responsibility into a sacred political obligation, which women, denied full citizenship, remain unable to fulfill, framing them as suspect citizens.

This sacred obligation for democracy's future encompasses American women's responsibility for protecting against finite male vice, which facilitates the democratic despotism against which female virtue must

protect. The chaos, ambition, and greed characteristic of democratic public life, while providing fertile ground for American men to pursue economic gain, creates a thin obligation to politics and the opportunity for democratic despotism. New male immigrants to the United States embody the dangers posed by unmarried men who, without wives to bind them to the common good, cause extreme political disorder, such as the riots, largely arising from racial and ethnic tensions, that broke out in Philadelphia and New York City throughout the 1830s. For Tocqueville, these events epitomize vice.<sup>33</sup> Restraining the male vice that threatens such political disorder becomes the responsibility of American women. Their infinite moral and civic virtue empowers them to assume moral responsibility for themselves, their families, and men, which transforms into a political obligation for protecting against the democratic despotism that results from unfettered male vice. American women attain this ability as young girls schooled in the ways of democracy. “The vices and dangers of society are soon plain to her,” Tocqueville explains, “and seeing them clearly, she judges them without illusion and faces them without fear, for she is full of confidence in her own powers, and it seems that this feeling is shared by all around her.”<sup>34</sup> Firsthand knowledge of public vice enables American women to identify it and protect the family and democracy from its insidious capacity to corrode the common good.

Marriage, as the cornerstone of political stability, demands extensive protections from vice and corruption. “All those vices which tend to impair the purity of morals and the stability of marriage,” Tocqueville observes, “are treated in America with a severity unknown in the rest of the world.”<sup>35</sup> Anchoring democratic order, marriage erects a barrier against the vice of instability, one solely defended, not by the male citizen’s honor, but by the female moral guardian’s finite virtues of chastity, fidelity, courage, and infinite moral capacity for self-sacrifice. Alternatively, promiscuity, infidelity, cowardice, and selfishness represent possible female vices, although Tocqueville never specifies them. This omission indicates the political significance of the infinite moral and civic weight placed on female virtue that women exercise through marriage and the family to protect democracy.

Tocqueville’s American men and women operate according to the gendered logic of virtue and vice, exposing the separate spheres paradox:

the sexual division of moral labor necessary to protect against democratic despotism results in the very habitual inattention to politics that causes it. Industry demands the attention of male citizens, who earn the finite virtue of honor for economic achievement. Women focus on the family as the source and site of their virtue, where they preserve infinite and finite moral and civic virtue for the entire nation. This sexual division of moral labor between the economy and the family creates the context in which the people's inattention to politics becomes habitual. Only great political matters capture their attention. Everyday freedoms, as a result, gradually disappear without the people noticing, which leads to democratic despotism. Direct attention to politics falls to elected politicians, who occupy a morally devalued public space. The civic obligation to protect the common good belongs, not to politicians or male citizens, but to female moral guardians, whose political identity depends on their exclusion from the corrupt sphere of public life. Citizen participation in formal politics, devoid of female virtue or male honor, becomes, at best, amoral and, at worst, vice-ridden.

This combination elevates direct political *inactivity* to a standard of moral excellence in American democracy. Tocqueville's support for the separate spheres ultimately perpetuates, instead of prevents, the conditions of democratic despotism. A morally impoverished sense of citizen engagement as only an obligatory and instrumental means to economic and social ends, as opposed to an end in itself, promotes habitual inattention to politics, which diminishes the importance of direct, consistent activism to democratic citizenship.

## A "Curl Back" to Virtue: Neutralizing Gender in Contemporary Morality

Contemporary thinkers Alasdair MacIntyre, Amitai Etzioni, and William Galston share Tocqueville's concern that decaying morality leads to disorder and decline in democracy. These scholars, from differing perspectives, hope to "curl back" to 1950s America before rampant individualism and unrestrained freedom advanced by the women's and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, they argue, effectively replaced moral tradition with relativism. Without a moral compass, identity-based politics results in an unchecked pluralism that fragments

the political community. A “curl back” did begin in the 1990s to regenerate moral virtues that would turn the nation to “face in the other direction” and “to push the pendulum back to stave off anarchy and to restore social order.”<sup>36</sup> Feminists often refer to this swing as a backlash that entails returning to a separate spheres ideology captured here by the 1950s *Ozzie and Harriet* television show. The “back to virtue” position taken by MacIntyre, Etzioni, and Galston frames a return to a virtue-based tradition as essential to unifying a disorderly nation on the verge of moral anarchy. Virtue represents the link necessary to reconnect individuals to a sense of self and the people to a community, where a shared tradition binds them together in the common good. This quest for unity to save liberal democracy from excessive difference leads these three thinkers to neutralize the gendered power dynamics inherent to a virtue-based moral tradition by deflecting attention away from power. Contrary to their interest in reinvigorating civic engagement, these scholars, like Tocqueville, advance a position that promotes the vice of habitual inattention to politics, a sphere designed for navigating the conflicts inherent to human life.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre diagnoses contemporary liberalism as suffering from a thin conception of the moral subject defined by a level of self-interest that negates a true idea of the “good life.” Aristotelian virtue tradition serves as MacIntyre’s cure for this social malady. Aristotle clearly differentiates between men’s and women’s capacity for virtue. While both remain capable of moral goodness, he states, “the fact still remains that temperance—and similarly courage, and justice—are not, as Socrates held, the same as in a woman as they are in a man. One kind of courage is concerned with ruling, the other with serving; and the same is true of other forms of goodness.”<sup>37</sup> Temperance defines female virtue, enabling women to control their desires enough to function in service to men. Their reason allows men to attain the justice and wisdom that grants them access to the *polis* where they govern. Women remain in the *oikos* where they fulfill the community’s demand for productive and reproductive labor. This functionalist position assigns men and women different tasks in these separate spheres on the basis of their differing moral capacities. The moral order that results secures social stability. MacIntyre omits this dimension of Aristotle’s ethical tradition to adopt a position that appears gender neutral in order to avoid introducing

difference into his teleological argument for virtue, which would undermine his view that this moral path can unify Americans.

Difference in a political world shaped by identities based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ableism, and religion, for MacIntyre, generates a moral relativism causing contemporary liberalism's decline. He traces this problem to the Enlightenment's construction of the autonomous self as denying the individual access to a moral identity predetermined by a theistic and teleological world order. Disconnected from tradition and a *telos* by reason and self-determination makes modern man a creature of social context defined by personal preferences and self-interest. Without a *telos*, an individual's identity "can then be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it *is* in and for itself nothing."<sup>38</sup> This "democratized self" possesses no essential identity or defined nature and, therefore, no means to create meaningful standards of moral judgment for the individual much less the community.<sup>39</sup> Moral character in modern liberalism amounts to living within the rules of a law-abiding society, which ensures the security necessary for individuals to pursue their self-interest and external goods. Man's "good life" no longer equates with that of the *polis*, and citizens lose any meaningful link to the political community. For MacIntyre, the *telos* unifies the individual's moral self and, as a result, the fragmented moral and political order.

Virtue focuses MacIntyre's vision of political life as emanating from moral subjects unified in a shared moral tradition that provides the teleological means for repairing liberalism's shattered self. Power disappears from this vision as people return to virtue to resolve the dilemmas of diversity generated by moral relativism. A shared virtue tradition brings people together around a common understanding of "the good life" and displaces differences, conflicts, and disorder. To overcome the association of tradition with the static status quo of the past, MacIntyre argues for "a living tradition" that "is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."<sup>40</sup> Changing contexts and historical circumstances may require people to make moral judgments by negotiating between already existing cultural and religious traditions and a foundational Aristotelian virtue tradition. Narrowing negotiation in this way negates how these traditions grant virtue to the dominant

governing class, which acquires moral authority over the subordinate, less virtuous, and often vice-ridden class that serves it. Virtue deflects attention away from the politics operating in these moral traditions that justify inequality between categories of people on the basis of predetermined conceptions passed from one generation to the next through the virtue-vice dualism.

This focus on virtue results in a gender neutrality that overlooks the inherent role of vice. Women's exclusion from public life on the basis of their moral inferiority disappears as a factor denying them a voice in shaping these moral traditions. Yet the moral traditions now upheld as virtue traditions continue to justify gender inequality. MacIntyre does claim that women should acquire full citizenship; however, the virtue tradition on which his argument rests imports women's inequality, constraint, and exclusion into the political community's idea of the "good life." The question then remains: *For whom* would this be the good life? Failure to account for how virtue justifies dividing people into dominant and subordinate categories redeploys a tradition actually premised on difference and inequality instead of unity, the goal of MacIntyre's project. The dualistic logic of this moral tradition equates difference in moral identity or political belief with vice as suspicious and potentially traitorous behavior that threatens the community's order and unity. Virtue functions to exercise political power to construct a political community's "good life" based on unity rather than difference and a predetermined tradition predicated on a level of homogeneity and conformity antithetical to democracy.

Deflecting attention away from the power dynamics inherent to a virtue tradition creates what I call the problem of insularity, which characterizes political communities built on the moral scaffolding of the virtue-vice dualism. MacIntyre's framing of practice illustrates the problem of insularity. Practice, within ethical contexts, generally refers to the actions and relationships of those within a specific community that provide the basis on which the community builds its normative standards. MacIntyre defines practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those



standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>41</sup>

Practices, according to MacIntyre, pertain to the internal goods derived from engaging in a practice already established by those participating in it. Practitioners set the terms for the practice, excluding all outsiders from participating in any negotiations and effectively insulating the practice from external forces. Individuals achieve a higher standard of excellence when an activity belongs to a practice or predetermined tradition that over time establishes, often through trial and error, the best means for achieving set goals. Bricklaying, for MacIntyre, is not a practice, but architecture is because designing and building large structures belongs to a tradition with standards of excellence. This virtue tradition prevents MacIntyre's conception of practice from being applied to bricklayers, who, in reality, like architects, belong to a tradition that informs their practices, which provide the skilled labor necessary to erect the large structures designed by architects. Under a veil of neutrality created by presumed standards of excellence, virtue imports a range of moral assumptions that perpetuate inequalities premised on valuing one dominant group, such as architects, over another, such as bricklayers.

The problem of insularity refers to the way in which virtue erects a protective wall around categories of people whose moral excellence emanates from such a well-established tradition that it appears to be natural rather than deriving from exercises of power to maintain dominant and subordinate classes in society. Locating virtue tradition in practice would suggest MacIntyre's orientation toward accounting for such power dynamics. MacIntyre specifically aims to overcome the limits of Rawls's Kantian ethics, which suffers, in his estimation, from a universalism and transcendence that provide a thin view of the moral subject. By grounding virtue tradition in human actions that occur in material contexts, MacIntyre advances a more fully contextualized moral subject embedded in a complex, changing social and material reality.<sup>42</sup>

Virtue, however, insulates these moral subjects within specific sets of practices that, for the most part, fail to meet the standards of excellence

assigned to practices such as architecture. Their voices as members of a community affected by the structures designed by architects remain silenced, since, as outsiders to the practice, they lack legitimacy. Even practitioners must accept the authority of the preexisting tradition as the standard of excellence against which they judge each other, insulating them from active engagement in determining their practices. Those who explore new practices, such as alternative bricklaying methods or architectural designs, challenge this tradition, which readily locates them on the side of vice, a fact that perpetuates “bad” or outmoded practices. Virtue tradition also makes it difficult for new groups such as women to engage in, much less participate in, developing those practices closed off to them by tradition. Failure to account for such political dynamics develops a thinner understanding of the moral subject and the way that virtue tradition upholds divisions in society predicated on inequality between categories of people. These divisions appear as “givens” or natural because of their longevity and insulation from interrogation.

Focusing on liberal pluralism rather than moral relativism, Amitai Etzioni and William Galston turn to Alexis de Tocqueville to advance a functionalist argument for virtue similar to MacIntyre’s that also omits gendered power dynamics. Etzioni outlines a “sociology of virtue” based on the primary virtues of autonomy and order that allow the individual to live in active tension with the community. This active tension would create social stability without government intervention. Moral tradition integrates with modern concepts of freedom to achieve a “virtuous equilibrium” that supports Etzioni’s new golden rule: “respect and uphold society’s moral order as you would have society respect and uphold your autonomy.”<sup>43</sup> Informed by Tocqueville, this idea that morality anchors American democracy against the chaos of democratic freedoms also grounds William Galston’s argument for liberalism as inherently possessing the virtues necessary for democracy to function successfully.<sup>44</sup> Galston codifies these virtues into five categories—general, general political, liberal, political, and liberal economy—to clarify that courage, loyalty, independence, tolerance, patience, hard work, and self-restraint, among others, constitute the moral backbone of contemporary liberal democracy. Despite their reliance on Tocqueville’s political thinking about virtue’s essential part in sustaining American democracy, neither

Galston nor Etzioni address the separate spheres ideology characterizing Tocqueville's view that American men and women possess different virtues. Avoiding the sexual division of labor that secures women's role in the private sphere by placing the heavy weight of moral responsibility on female virtue attempts to neutralize gender difference by deflecting attention away from the power dynamics operating within this moral tradition.

This gender-neutral position omits female moral virtue from a liberal tradition that, as Tocqueville argues, requires women's morality to act as a counterbalance to democratic freedom. On these grounds, Tocqueville goes so far as to attribute great political significance to American women. Etzioni and Galston remove women and female virtue from this equation. Etzioni advances order as a primary virtue needed in American democracy. Galston frames self-restraint as the liberal virtue necessary for citizens to limit their individual freedoms voluntarily in order to accommodate others' needs based on a community's shared moral understanding. Such temperance, for Galston, requires the liberal individual to exercise self-control in conjunction with the virtue of self-transcendence, which frames personal restraint in terms of meeting the demands of the common good.<sup>45</sup> The female virtue of self-sacrifice disaggregates into the two liberal virtues of self-restraint and transcendence that extend from finite individual action to the infinite realm of reaching beyond the self for the community's greater moral and political good. Neutralizing gender in this way could be read as redistributing the double burden of moral responsibility traditionally assigned to women through the female virtue of self-sacrifice to all American citizens, who would collectively become democracy's moral guardians.

Removing the gender attributed to these virtues by Tocqueville, however, belies the fact that Etzioni and Galston share his view of the traditional American family as necessary to anchoring democracy against its inherent chaos. This position assumes that women's primary responsibility remains to their husbands and children in the private sphere, where they carry the weight of protecting the entire nation from moral decay. Second wave feminism, for Etzioni and Galston, brought America to the precipice of social anarchy because this movement pushed women to abandon the family for jobs in the public sphere, leaving the "seedbeds of virtue" untended. As democracy's foundation, the

heterosexual two-parent family establishes the mores and social institutions necessary to protect the people from intrusive government intervention and extensive centralization. Resurrecting the “Ozzie and Harriet” family will rebuild this crumbling foundation. Children, importantly, will again acquire from their parents the civic character necessary to assume their responsibilities as future citizens. The moral weight placed on the family by Tocqueville for upholding the nation’s common good remains, since, Galston explains, “it follows that if families become less capable of performing that role, the well-being of the entire community is jeopardized.”<sup>46</sup> Meeting the demands of this double burden requires protecting the traditional family from the deteriorating forces of high divorce rates, single motherhood, illegitimate births, and gay and lesbian marriage and adoption.<sup>47</sup> Galston and Etzioni oppose nontraditional family structures and efforts that strengthen day care programs while they support imposing stricter divorce laws that entail “braking mechanisms” and cooling-off periods. Gendered power dynamics operate beneath the veil of moral neutrality to return American women to their place beside Harriet Nelson in the kitchen.

American women’s supposed mass exodus from the private sphere as a result of second wave feminism assigns them the responsibility for the traditional family’s decline, which leaves liberal pluralism unchecked by strong moral virtues that bind people to a common good. Blame for the nation’s decay falls to women for abandoning their virtuous role as moral guardians in private life. Galston and Etzioni fail to account for the double shift of labor that American women perform inside and outside the home as mothers and workers, the lack of men’s contribution to reproductive labor in the home, or the structural shifts in society that require two parents to work outside the home just to support their families. Privileging male irresponsibility features in such arguments that frame women as solely responsible for morality through their role in the family. Any deviation from that virtuous path makes American women vulnerable targets in backlash politics that blames them for the nation’s decline and denies them a part in positively contributing to solutions in ways other than returning to the family. Focusing on virtue attends to a person’s moral character while shifting attention away from structural economic changes, women’s gains in equal education and employment, and increased female political representation. Habitual inattention to

politics results from such "back to virtue" arguments that, in this case, reframe virtue in gender-neutral terms despite the fact that their operation aims to resurrect the separate spheres ideology and return women to the private sphere. Backlash politics, in this way, appears to support democratic values of difference, diversity, and tolerance while actually redeploying the virtue-vice dualism to frame women as suspect citizens for abandoning their post as the nation's moral guardians.

Reading MacIntyre, Etzioni, and Galston against the traditions on which they rely to unify Americans against the forces of liberal pluralism and moral relativism illustrates how their multiple virtues position redeploys a separate spheres ideology consistent with backlash or "curl back" politics. Virtue functions to lower a veil of gender neutrality since, as a standard of excellence emanating from tradition, this concept appears devoid of the power dynamics characteristic of politics as an arena for negotiating difference. A gendered perspective, however, reveals how virtue redeploys traditional moral beliefs deeply embedded in Western political thought into the American political script, where these beliefs continue to justify women's exclusion from public life in order to maintain social order. Reliance on virtue tradition without critically engaging its gender dynamics perpetuates the problem of insularity that protects such moral traditions from interrogation given their apparent "goodness" or excellence. Feminist theorists and others who interrogate these traditions may be regarded with suspicion for questioning them, particularly as a group excluded from predetermined practices. Assuming virtue's gender neutrality as a means of promoting unity through a shared understanding of a common good as opposed to valuing difference insulates the political community and its moral subjects from the realities of power exercised through a morality premised on inequality.

## Habitual Inattention to Democracy: The Power of Vice

The "back to virtue" politics advanced by Etzioni, Galston, and MacIntyre hopes to prevent American democracy's moral decline that fragments the political community. Their attention focuses on recommitting the people to a virtue tradition that promotes unity instead of difference, agreement instead of discord. The moral subject displaces the citizen as a matter of interest in reviving democracy. Returning to a

predetermined tradition replaces political negotiation and deliberation with acceptance. Politics as a means for determining the distribution of resources by exercising power in various ways ranging from negotiation and deliberation to force disappears from this “back to virtue” position.

Such habitual inattention to politics, Tocqueville warns, represents the greatest vice in a democracy. Americans are “often carried away, far beyond the bounds of common sense, by some sudden passion or hasty opinion. . . . Unable to be expert at all, a man easily becomes satisfied with half-baked notions.”<sup>48</sup> The people, overwhelmed by an extensive amount of information about the issues and little time to digest it, tend simply to adopt the majority’s opinion, thereby creating conditions conducive to the tyranny of the majority, which dictates public opinion and silences minority voices. To protect democracy from such forces of despotism, Tocqueville advises Americans to attend to political matters ranging from voting for representatives to the “petty affairs” of everyday life.<sup>49</sup> Constant attention to the everyday life related to family and civil society can prevent democracy from slipping into despotism by establishing the private sphere as a zone of personal freedoms protected from government intervention.

Preserving the common good through moral unity does not lead MacIntyre, Etzioni, or Galston to address how politics actually operates in everyday life, which involves accounting for differences among the people. Gender neutrality indicates this inattention to power dynamics and ultimately the omission of vice that connotes moral disorder and frames women as suspect citizens instead of moral guardians. Vice, a default category for all behaviors outside the standards of excellence, equates with moral difference and divergence from a political community unified around a shared moral understanding of the common good. Vice puts the complicated, messy aspects of everyday ethical life into stark relief as a critical part of a political community in which the people negotiate conflicts related to differing identities, beliefs, material needs, wants, and interests. Habitual inattention to politics characterizes the multiple virtues position that avoids the realities of vice to advance an “Ozzie and Harriet” morality, which promotes consensus as the optimal political outcome without accounting for dissent and disagreements as necessary to liberal democracy. Similar to *Ozzie and Harriet*, moral dilemmas and minor conflicts end with a positive resolution

emanating from shared moral beliefs predicated on a separate spheres ideology.

Attending only to virtue perpetuates an unrealistic, incomplete picture of the moral subject and the moral ambiguities inherent to the diversity and pluralism prized in democratic societies. This complex political terrain requires enough moral ambiguity for the people to meet the hard demands of liberal democracy. "Liberalism imposes extraordinary ethical difficulties on us," Judith Shklar asserts, "to live with the contradictions, unresolvable conflicts, and balancing between public and private imperatives which are neither opposed to nor at one with each other."<sup>50</sup> Ordinary vices contribute to a democratic ethics capable of negotiating these complexities. Snobbery arises from justifying the inclusion of some and exclusion of others that creates inequality—the price, according to Shklar, that a liberal society pays for diversity and difference. Hypocrisy naturally occurs in representative democracy, which creates a gap between politicians and their ability to represent constituent interests and results in a healthy skepticism by the people toward their government. Such ordinary vices play a necessary civic role in liberal democracy by accounting for the complex realities of political life that empowers citizens with an ethics capable of helping them to navigate it. *Civic* vices make citizens attentive to the behaviors that can damage and destroy the common good. Thus vice prevents the habitual inattention to the realities of everyday political life that Tocqueville worried would erode democracy's freedom. Vices often trigger public attention that engages deliberation about perceived wrongdoing and its relationship to the political community.

Analyzing the gendered dynamics of virtue and vice in the multiple virtues position illustrates how a façade of neutrality erected by moral assumptions of excellence passed from one era to the next makes a separate spheres ideology difficult to discern. Gender neutrality also characterizes Shklar's work on ordinary vices, which indicates how virtue and vice appear as "givens" insulated from differences among people and changing contexts by traditional moral beliefs. This insularity poses a problem by deflecting attention away from a set of gendered power dynamics operating through the virtue-vice dualism that directly affect American women's full citizenship. Despite the focus of "back to virtue" advocates on women's role as moral guardians of the nation's common

good, vice remains the defining feature of their relationship to politics since even their finite vices hold an infinite capacity to threaten the nation's future. Female moral vice, as a result, entails this civic dimension that ties a woman's individual behavior to a nation's success or failure. Indeed, women's engagement in public and political life equates with civic vice, since it involves abandoning their post as moral guardians, which causes disorder and disruption.

Backlash politics capitalizes on this gendered moral dynamic, which enables its proponents to frame a woman's increased access to education, jobs, and political office as destroying American democracy. Such societal doubt about women's loyalty to the nation emanates from a virtue tradition built on a separate spheres ideology that narrows women's value to political life in terms of moral guardianship and places all other avenues to full citizenship under suspicion. Backlashes channel a broader and deeper societal suspicion of politics as a morally valued, much less virtuous part of American democracy. Valuing such skepticism of politics perpetuates the very habitual inattention to public life that, Tocqueville warns, must be protected to preserve everyday freedoms. Vice in this moral calculus equates with political power to signal moral corruption, which devalues the engagement critical to sustaining liberal democracy.