



## Critical Piety

### OUR URGENT NEED TO RECOVER AN ANCIENT VIRTUE

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- Piety has not always meant “devoutness” or personal religious feelings and practice.
- For the ancients, piety is public and productive.
- In this paper, I discuss the ancient virtue and the American pragmatists’ reclamation of it, and then present three interventions. These are that piety ought to be both retrospective *and* prospective, symbolic *and* material, and always critical.

#### ANCIENT PIETY

- For the ancients, piety was a central virtue.
- Cicero writes that piety is granting what is owed to parents, the nation, and (in his later works) to the gods.

- In a number of places, he says it is the foundation of all of the other virtues.

#### PRAGMATIC PIETY

- John Dewey wrote that that it is essential for humans to have a sense of their participation “as a cooperating part of a larger whole” and that piety “is an inherent constituent of a just perspective in life.”
- Santayana wrote that piety involves “man’s reverent attachment to the sources of his being and the steadying of his life by that attachment.”
- Stout, Rogers, and Winters have each joined the early pragmatists in reclaiming the democratic virtue of piety.
- For Stout, piety is the “just or appropriate response to the sources of one’s existence and progress through life.”
- For a helpful gloss, see Rosa Wakefield’s quotation in Gwaltney’s *Drylongso*.

## RETROSPECTIVE & PROSPECTIVE PIETY

- Santayana says that piety should be retrospective; Stout agrees.
- But we ought to be more attentive to the diachronicity of human life. Social cooperation requires time.
- Piety also should demand our proper acknowledgment of the many sources of our continued and presumptive lives in the times to come. Piety, therefore, should be both *retrospective* and *prospective*.

## SYMBOLIC & MATERIAL PIETY

- Piety should be *specific*. Pinches critiques Stout, saying that Stout's account is not specific enough, and he is right. We should not merely be grateful for a generalized "other" but to specific people who make our lives possible.
- We also should demonstrate our pious gratitude *materially*, in tangible, substantial offerings. Symbolic piety is necessary but not sufficient.

## CRITICAL PIETY

- For Stout, piety requires the "proper acknowledgment" and the "just and appropriate response" to those that have made our existence possible. Stout does not explicitly discuss the fact that in some cases, a "just and appropriate response" to the sources of our being is not *appreciation* but *denunciation*.
- For example, I have been formed by white supremacist and patriarchal social systems, but these require my lament, not gratitude.
- To *renounce* is not the same thing as *repudiate*: the latter is merely to deny, or to refuse to acknowledge something. Critical piety deliberately acknowledges the more dreadful sources of one's being as *fully one's own*, insofar as that institution made one who one is.

## HONORING OUR MOTHERS—AND ALL MOTHERS

- We are indebted to many others upon whom we depend; we ought to acknowledge the degree to which we are and have always been dependent upon others.
- This gratitude should be offered toward those who carried each of us for the better part of a year.

- Yet while our indebtedness to our own mothers endures, it is not just our own mothers that deserve our piety, but *all* mothers, as they make the maintenance of society possible.
- This piety toward all mothers should not be merely symbolic, but also material, offered in the form of maternity leave and other accommodations.
- But the piety we owe mothers ought also to be critical. We must carefully disentangle the gratitude we owe mothers from existing social norms that marginalize women, including trans women.

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