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Back to the Basics: Aristotelian Virtue in The Grapes of Wrath

Often the greatest formation in one's life occurs during the most difficult struggles. In 1939, when John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath was released, the U.S. was in a piteous state due to the Depression. The American people were being stretched thin. Steinbeck witnessed these conditions, and wrote his novel in a way that creatively revealed the ills in society. He also, through the Joad family, demonstrated how hope can and must exist even in the worst situations. The source of his complex philosophy has been debated among critics since the novel's publication. Steinbeck is not necessarily a trailblazer in the area of philosophy; in fact, his ideas are reminiscent of ancient Greek virtue as described in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. Although it has been argued that Steinbeck was using his novel to voice his liberal ideas about women's rights or Marxism, evidence from Aristotle reveals more parallels between Steinbeck's philosophy and ancient ideas.

Steinbeck has a tenor of hopeful humanism throughout his novels, particularly in The Grapes of Wrath, which is reminiscent of Greek philosophy. Harold Gardiner calls Steinbeck's common theme a "reverence for life" and deems it responsible for the majority of Steinbeck's popularity at the time of the novels' release (218). Gardiner notes that most writers at the time, such as William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, use "violent narratives," and "have been a reflection and a propagator of bleak despair with

meaningless overtones of defiance" (219). According to Alfred Kazin, Steinbeck's contemporaries had to "announce their revolt against capitalist society and yet satisfy their crisis-begotten sense of violence, that significant disposition to hate and to destroy which grew out of the pervasive atmosphere of panic" (369). Conversely, Steinbeck suggests despite the crises of life and the pain accompanied by them, that life is ultimately beautiful and good. While Steinbeck does not sugarcoat the realities of life, particularly the harsh realities of the Depression era, he introduces characters like Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon, who are not the hero-types who make the problems disappear, but represent hope in the midst of the suffering.

Steinbeck's use of Biblical allegory combined with Casy's seemingly transcendental ideology has caused confusion with many critics concerning what kind of philosophy Steinbeck was trying to promote. Thomas Evans cites both the flood and Rose of Sharon's role as examples of this "pattern of ambiguous and ambivalent Biblical symbolism" (76). The novel, however, is not Christian, as Peter Lisca explains through his description of Jim Casy: "he moves from Bible-belt evangelism to social prophecy" (179). In fact, Evans sees Steinbeck's work as a "modernist tragedy," when it is actually a hopeful novel with ancient ideals (74). The terming of this novel as a modernist tragedy is understandable considering Steinbeck's dismissal of traditional Christian or religious ideology. Casy actually states that his belief in "one big soul" is "the most unreligious thing" (24). However, when Casy is put in the context of the whole novel, his lifestyle significantly resembles the lifestyle promulgated in Aristotle's Ethics, which helps explain the rejection of religion, yet the promotion of virtue, within the novel.

From the first chapter of the novel, Steinbeck sets the reader up with the traditional family hierarchy. The individual family functions as a unit of community, a microcosm of what will be developed later in the novel. In this first interlude chapter, the author paints a picture of how the dust and desolation have settled in and taken over the daily lives of the families and farms. The men are silent, the women stand by the men waiting on their reaction, and the children play close by. The picture of the family—patriarchal and stolid—is established. When the whole Joad family is first seen together, their positioning is particularly important. Warren Motley notes, "The position of greatest authority in the Joad's ceremonial hierarchy is the position closest to the soil. The women and children stand; Grampa Joad, deprived of all but token authority by his age, sits on the truck's running board; the men who make decisions squat" (403). Motley then points out how this positioning is a statement about the poor condition of the Joad family as a patriarchal institution. Banks and corporate landowners already succeeded in "severing the connection between family and land;" the Joads are forced to gather around their car rather than in their home, and the patriarch of the family is senile (403). The family, as it stands, is vulnerable.

Steinbeck makes the first of his retrospective ideals evident in his treatment of Ma within the Joad family dynamic. Steinbeck describes her from the beginning as "the citadel of the family" (74). As Motley notes, unlike the "forty-acre farm that sustained the patriarch's individualism…Ma Joad's matriarchal citadel is a strong place that cannot be taken" (407). Ma, one of the six members of the family who survives and remains with the family to the end of the novel, remains a stronghold for the family, deeply rooted.

Ma Joad's prominence is not, however, a statement from Steinbeck concerning women's roles or rights; rather, it is a statement about community. As Motley notes, the term "matriarchy" does not denote primitive societies where the female leaders exercise domination over the rest of the society, particularly the males. Instead, he writes, "matriarchy describes a radically different relationship between people based on cooperation rather than power" (399). This is not to say that a man could not be the impetus for the same social change, but the traditional values and traits that society associates with women are more fitting with a leader of this type of community. Some of these characteristics, according to Motley, include familial feeling, group sympathy and companionship (399). All of these traits completely oppose the concept of individualism, capitalistic competition and Darwinism—three concepts that receive scathing criticism in The Grapes of Wrath. Since societies run by men invented these last three ideas, they become associated with the patriarchal lifestyle as opposed to Ma Joad's communal lifestyle. Motley writes,

> Under the economic conditions of the migration, survival depends on the collective security of matriarchal society rather than on patriarchal self-reliance. In broader terms, Steinbeck uses Ma Joad's heightened stature to suggest that the communal values … might provide an alternative basis for authority in American society as a whole. (405)

There are numerous examples throughout the novel of the Joad family's transformation into a broader community, facilitated by Ma. First, Ma breaks the norm when the subject of Jim Casy is brought up. She clears her throat during the ritual hierarchical squat-and-talk and insists there is always room for one more in the car. This

is an example of the Joads' community extending from blood family to include a close friend. Casy is a mild example of what the Joads will eventually accomplish, since Casy is actually a help to the family on the trip, and he is no stranger to them. The next additions to the Joad community are the Wilsons, and Ma has the final word in this as well. Although Tom and Al come up with the idea for the two families to travel together for practical reasons, it is Ma who reminds the group that Sairy Wilson helped bury Grampa. At this point "the relationship was plain," and there is no more discussion on the issue (148).

Ma is a very original character, she represents a sort of ideal, and Steinbeck holds her up as an example for both women and men. When the family encounters the Hooverville and has their first experience with a large group of Okies, the reader realizes that there are many families who are worse off than the Joads. In the stew scene, Ma does what she can to help the hungry children in the camp. She goes by the same principle she did when they adopted Casy—there is already not enough, so why not share a little more. The stew scene signifies the extending of the border of community out to anyone in need who asks for help. The symbol of sharing a meal with these strangers is the image of sacrifice and unity. Finally, when Rose of Sharon breastfeeds the starving man at Ma's insistence, the community is extended to anyone who has need at all. The Joads, who have known suffering and loss, will not turn down help to anyone who comes in their path. As Motley writes,

> When Rose of Sharon offers her breast to a starving man, her smile announces her initiation into a matriarchal mystery: the capacity to nurture life. The scene confirms Ma Joad's belief that family unity can be extended to the wider community,

and its shock, springing from the denial of sexuality in the meeting of man and woman, asserts the thesis that society originates not in sexual union but in maternal nurturing. (411)

In a seemingly depressing and disturbing ending, Steinbeck actually means to provide hope for the future. Motley writes, “This shift to matriarchal authority represents a regression to a more primitive social organization. But Steinbeck offers the step ‘back’ to matriarchy as a promise of hope” (405).

Although Steinbeck probably did not use Aristotle’s Ethics as a model for community in his novel, the similarities are notable. Steinbeck writes with a definite moral tone that almost feels didactic at times. This suggestion of community as a way of life corresponds with Aristotle’s belief that friendship itself is a virtue and is “most necessary for life” (143). While Steinbeck was not making a point about the superiority or dominance of women, Aristotle most certainly was not, either. Ancient Greek society, while not necessarily patriarchal, did view women as inferior. Aristotle makes this evident when he writes about different hierarchical friendships, including the relationship between a father and son and the relationship between a husband and wife in the same category (152). However, Aristotle had a certain respect for maternal roles and believed that the image of love is the love of a mother for her child. He writes,

Mothers delight in loving, for some of them give up their own children to be brought up, and feel love just in knowing them, not seeking to be loved in return if both are not possible; it seems to be sufficient for them if they see their children doing well, and they love them even if the children, in their ignorance, give back nothing of

what is due to a mother. And since friendship is present more in loving … the virtue belonging to friends seems to be loving. (153)

Aristotle writes that blood ties in a family are stronger than the friendships formed outside the family, but as Joe Sachs notes, the word *philia* is used for "love" in both areas. There seems to be a type of familial love in every friendship, and, as Aristotle states, "Every sort of friendship, then, is a community" (158). Similarly, Steinbeck's novel depicts two types of community—the blood family and the extended community—the former being a starting point for the latter. Frederic Carpenter writes, "Formerly the only unit of human love was the family, and the family remains the fundamental unit…. But the new moral of this novel is that the love of all people—if it be unselfish—may even supersede the love of family" (321). Both Aristotle and Steinbeck hold up the example of familial love and nurture as the strongest foundation for relationships and community.

Steinbeck also seems to be pointing his readers back to a more ancient manner of living through the novel's rejection of modern individualism. Here, Steinbeck also differs considerably from his contemporaries in both the arenas of philosophy and fiction. This spurning of solipsism is essential to Steinbeck's philosophy of community—the two cannot coexist. Jim Casy, the source of most philosophical wisdom in the novel, goes out into the wilderness to find his soul, only to discover "he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole" (418). Aristotle's concept of community is largely based on the idea of the *polis*,

or city-state, and the idealistic adherence of all members of the *polis* to the virtuous life. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes,

> This notion of the political community as a common project is alien to the modern liberal individualist world. Friendship, of course, on Aristotle's view, involves affection. But that affection arises within a relationship defined in terms of a common allegiance to and a common pursuit of goods. (156)

Aristotle's ideal community only functions if its members are seeking after the good and if they remain members of the community. Aristotle even claims that the virtue of friendship should be taken more seriously than the virtue of justice in the maintenance of a society (144). Certainly, this preference is because there would be little need for justice if people considered friendship as seriously as Aristotle does. Goodwill would triumph. Steinbeck describes, with a similar idealism, this type of *polis* in the course of the Joads' travels. Steinbeck writes,

> In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream…. A new unit was formed. They were known people—good people. (193)

There is no theft in these communities, and sharing of both property and suffering is key. Lester Marks writes of Steinbeck's philosophy, "Man is man because he has the ability to perceive his position in the macrocosm, to perceive that he is related to the whole thing" (82).

Adherence and loyalty to the community is essential in The Grapes of Wrath, just as it is implicit in the functioning of Aristotle's *polis*. When Connie abandons the family,

the reader despises him for abandoning his pregnant wife. And although Noah abandons the family for less deplorable reasons, his individualism is still a great loss for the family and a great disappointment to the reader. Jim Casy so aptly explains, "An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth, an' run off his own way… Fella like that bust the holiness" (164). Connie continuously talks to Rose of Sharon in the language of the American dream, saying that they will get to California, he will take night classes, and they will move up and out of their current social class into one where they have a nice house and ice (223). Ma points out to Rose of Sharon that she hopes this dream of theirs does not involve their abandonment of the rest of the family. Ultimately, Rose of Sharon maintains the community ideal (symbolically portrayed in the final scene of the novel), and Connie leaves to pursue his individual goals. Noah stays behind essentially because the communal life became more difficult than he wanted to deal with. Ironically, Noah will have no food or protection if he remains alone. Steinbeck shows that even when life in a community seems to be more difficult, one should always choose to maintain loyalty.

Just as every individual must be considered in light of the community, actions in The Grapes of Wrath can only be deemed wrong or right in light of one's particular situation and history. In an interlude chapter, there is a conversation between two unnamed individuals concerning the supposed difference between stealing land from Native Americans versus stealing a bottle of milk to feed one's children (237). Then Jim Casy and Uncle John have a conversation concerning whether Uncle John is guilty of sin because his wife died after he did not take her to the doctor. Casy's response is "for anybody else it was a mistake, but if you think it was a sin—then it's a sin. A fella builds

his own sins right up from the groun'" (225). There is a heavy sense of not necessarily moral relativity in these examples, but serious consideration for the circumstances surrounding the events, as well as the roles of the individuals involved. MacIntyre terms this concept, evident also in Aristotle's explanation of virtues, narrative. He writes,

> What the narrative concept of selfhood requires is thus twofold. On one hand, I am what I may justifiably be taken by others to be in the course of living out a story that runs from my birth to my death. I am the subject of a history that is my own…. The other aspect of narrative selfhood is correlative. I am not only accountable, I am one who can always ask others for an account… I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. (217-218)

Aristotle's Ethics contains a surprising dearth of do's and don'ts and is much less about a moral code as the constant seeking out of virtue in the context of the community.

Narrative is also an important consideration in The Grapes of Wrath from its standpoint as an historical novel. Not only does Steinbeck make universal statements, but he also shows how living in the Depression era could change one's choices. When the Joads bury Grampa, they bury him in the ground with no marking on the grave—a choice that was only made under their unique circumstances. Willy Feeley ends up running his friends off their land as an act of desperation in order to feed his family. MacIntyre explains this saying, "We cannot… characterize behavior independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible" (206). Viewing that graveside scene or Feeley's actions out of their settings causes complete misunderstanding. If the Joads or Feeley had simply stuck

to a religiously influenced moral code and chosen to live their lives by those standards alone, they would have not made the choices they made unique to their situations.

The characters in Steinbeck's novel are faced with the realization that life is about taking action and making choices about one's feelings. Character, then, is built upon the quality of those choices made and actions taken. For instance, when Casy takes the rap for Tom at the Hooverville, there are several factors contributing to his choice. His narrative includes all that the Joad family has done for him and his experiences with them. He feels anger toward the deputy because of his mistreatment of the innocent people. As a result, the Reverend Casy (as Steinbeck chooses to call him at this time) chooses deliberately to kick the deputy to the point of unconsciousness (265). The reader generally interprets this violent act as evidence of Casy's strength of character rather than his weakness. This idea is essentially Aristotelian. Joe Sachs defines *energeia*, or being-at-work, as "the central notion in all of Aristotle's philosophy…. Everything depends upon the idea of an active condition that can be formed by a deliberately repeated way of being-at-work" (202). As Aristotle explains in his Metaphysics, everything that is derives its being from constant activity. Human life is no different. By being-at-work and making choices, one forms an active condition (*hexis*), which is influenced by feelings and desires. For instance, Sachs writes, "Fear is a feeling… a passive condition. Cowardice or courage are active conditions one may develop toward them. One's character is made up of active conditions" (201). Even the grand idea of the family's migration to California despite hunger, affliction and death, is senseless without considering it as part of their being-at-work. Carpenter asserts, "The point of the whole novel is that action is an

absolute essential of human life. If need and failure produce only fear, disintegration follows" (323).

Although it cannot be proven that the philosophy knit throughout Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath is based on Aristotelian virtue, the author is certainly pointing his reader back to ancient ideas through his hopeful humanism, promulgation of matriarchal community, denial of individuality, complex use of narrative and belief in non-religious morality. The similarity between these ideals and those outlined in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics is, to say the least, remarkable. Steinbeck wrote perhaps the greatest literary works about the American people throughout the entire 20th century. He knew the people and their struggles. He was not, however, writing their existing philosophy. The Joads were not the average family during the Depression in terms of their hope and communal spirit. Steinbeck wrote an intrinsically un-American philosophy in hopes of injecting perspective into the lives of the American people, no matter their station.

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