

informed consent,” and most businesses that employ ethicists “are, ethically speaking, better off for their presence.”

Nevertheless, Marino warns, the rise of the ethicists as “the new clergy” poses this dan-

ger: that the rest of us, taking the easy way out, will avoid moral decisions and issues on the excuse that they are too complicated and best left to the “experts.” Unfortunately, he says, there aren’t any.

The Chastened Liberal

“Bertrand de Jouvenel’s Melancholy Liberalism” by Brian C. Anderson, in *The Public Interest* (Spring 2001), 1112 16th St., N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Many of today’s enthusiasts for liberal democracy overlook its serious weaknesses. A neglected French thinker named Bertrand de Jouvenel (1903–87) knew better. “[His] melancholy liberalism has a lot to teach us,” writes Anderson, a senior editor of *City Journal*.

Born into an aristocratic French family and educated at the Sorbonne, Jouvenel saw the rise of totalitarianism firsthand. A radical socialist in his twenties, he then swung to the other extreme, but rapidly became disillusioned with it, too. As a journalist in the 1930s, he interviewed Mussolini and Hitler at length, and witnessed the Austrian Anschluss and the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia. Jouvenel joined the French Resistance, eventually fleeing to Switzerland with the Gestapo on his heels. By then, Anderson says, he was “the full-fledged anti-totalitarian liberal that he remained for the rest of his life.”

In exile as the war raged, Jouvenel wrote his first major work of political philosophy, *On Power: The Natural History of Its Growth*, examining how the modern state—even in contemporary liberal democratic societies—had become dangerous to liberty. Outside of small communities, the doctrine of popular sovereignty, if taken literally, is absurd, he argued, since the people themselves cannot actually govern. And whoever governs in their name can invoke the doctrine to justify almost anything, from the rounding up of political foes to the bombing of civilians. The notion of popular sovereignty also burdens the state with a host of new responsibilities, all supposedly to secure the people’s well-being. By making right and wrong a matter for each individual to determine, moreover, popular sovereignty unleashes a moral relativism that inevitably leads to

social disorder and to demands that the state suppress it.

“Despite its excessive pessimism,” writes Anderson, “*On Power* stands as a permanent warning to the citizens and statesmen of liberal democratic regimes that their freedom is difficult to sustain, for reasons inseparable from the logic of their own principles.” And later, particularly in his 1957 masterpiece *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Political Good*, Jouvenel developed “a more constructive political science,” which viewed liberal constitutionalism more positively.

In *Sovereignty* and other writings, he offered “a dynamic and political conception of the common good” that was more than just the sum of individual goods. Jouvenel was not a libertarian, wishing to do away with politics; neither was he an “armchair communitarian,” eager to restore the ancient Greek polis. For Jouvenel, says Anderson, the moral task of the modern democratic state “is to create the conditions that let ‘social friendship’—a common good compatible with the goods and freedoms of modernity—blossom. . . . To nurture this mutual trust is the essence of the art of politics.” Balancing innovation and conservation, the liberal statesman must do “everything possible to help a culture of ordered liberty prosper short of imposing a state truth.” This includes regulating “‘noxious activities’” and deflating “hopes for a permanent solution to the political problem.”

Liberal democracies can achieve genuine human goods, Jouvenel believed, but politics is seldom guided by the light of reason. Fragile liberal democracies, notes Anderson, “must remain on guard, lest their many weaknesses—from the erosion of personal responsibility, to their tendency toward collectivism, to the abiding hope for final solutions—make dust of these goods.”