



THE MYTH OF THE TABULA RASA

Posted on March 1, 2023 by Santiago Mondejar Flores



Perplexingly, one of the most notorious social tendencies in the Western sphere is the eagerness to empty Christian structures of their content, only to recreate them as self-founded secular simulacra, based on democratic monism. Beyond the fact that this drive reveals in essence that Western culture is objectified and secularized Christianity, and that, therefore, postmodern society, far from being post-Christian, is radically Christian. We can clearly see a reflection of this in the secularization of the doctrines of the Logos and the "powers" of Philo of Alexandria—[as well as](#) of the Cappadocian patristic concept of the perichoresis of the persons of the Trinity—in the ontological families, defined both in the three substrata of reality of [Karl Popper](#) (World 1, World 2 and World 3) and in the genera of materiality of [Gustavo Bueno](#) (Matter 1, Matter 2, Matter 3).

It is, on the other hand, quite evident that the attempts to base a secular morality on the normative principle that it should be rational, consistent and objective, face the difficulty of achieving universal validity, in spite of having endowed itself with a modern clergy, unquestionable and infallible by definition, in which the moralizing role of the ancient prophets is played by the opinion makers who proliferate in an ecosystem of media, educational institutions, public agencies, and activist organizations that are not averse to canceling dissent in order to impose their own dogmas, with the expectation that the dissident will remain silent, often using the name of reason in vain.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of this empty invocation of rationality lies in the fact that the value of moral values is neither verifiable nor falsifiable [à la Popper](#), and consequently unfounded (i.e., ethics cannot emanate from the scientific method), so that, if tradition is set aside, it is inevitable that, [à la Kelsen](#), since the validity of a legal norm cannot be empirical, it springs from arbitrary value judgments, established by subjective acts of will that do not concern the field of what is, but that of what ought to be. Consequently, the validity of positive law, [à la Kant](#), depends for its foundation not on ethical, religious or national pre-judicial convictions, but on obtaining its legitimacy from the legality of the democratic procedure, which is equivalent to saying that it suffers from circularity, inasmuch as it reduces moral guidelines to the democratic process, to which the category of monistic order is attributed.

This opens the door to the arbitrariness of the law, by making it contingent on the will of a circumstantial majority (the relative importance of moral issues is the aggregation of the preferences of each voter), an inconsistency of which the ancient Greeks were already aware, when they sought in

[Natural Law](#) a deeper foundation for positive law, in order to level out its tendency to be subject to the conjunctures of political power. Reflections of the same nature took place within [the School of Salamanca](#), giving rise to the elaboration of the precursor norms of [Human Rights](#), derived from the belief that man, as such, with no other qualification than his human condition, is the subject of rights, so that his existence is the bearer in, and by itself, of values and norms that we can find, but not create ex nihilo.

The opposite view—that law legitimizes itself by becoming law—presumes that values must be created, and consequently imposed, without the need for any justification other than the general will. In other words, morality is determined by the highest common denominator of the set of desires, aspirations and intentions of the electoral body; that is, the will derived from the mental states of the voters, rather than the normative expression of the authority of a moral ideal unconditioned by circumstances.

Consequently, this postulate represents moral development as an advance towards conditions in which a collective will, without historical or religious ballast, creates its values and determines its norms as if it existed in a sort of anthropological vacuum. Moral facts, however, are not something inchoate by means of a volitional act, exercised as part of a given legislative procedure. On the contrary, every actor participating in the electoral body is embedded in a specific moral tradition, from the moment he begins his conscious relationship with the social environment in which he has grown up.

The moral tradition is, therefore, a fact inherent to the civic reality, no matter how secular it may be. This consubstantiality leads to the fact that when political power turns secularism into laicism, society is plunged into a conflict of legitimacy, the most notorious consequence of which is to cause a split in the principle of authority, which ultimately calls into question authority itself. This is so because when someone is faced with a norm that clashes with his own moral tradition, he is forced to choose in conscience between two forms of authority, the moral and the legal, and consequently, he ends up abiding by the authority dictated by his own conscience, which, in the last analysis, means that he is no longer subject to any other authority.

Although there is no lack of concrete examples of this in many fields in our times, we will focus here on the field of education, since for decades it has become a battleground for culture wars and a laboratory for identity politics, even though the nature of what is at stake concerns fundamental questions that give us the opportunity to review an issue that has more to do with moral values than with pedagogical

technique, since it really concerns concepts such as parental "power" and "responsibility". It should come as no surprise that the school-world is the chosen arena in the struggle against moral tradition, since it is easy to see that behind the sophistry erected by the educational guilds and the [clienteles of Utopia](#), there lie pedagogical tendencies based on the theory of the tabula rasa, which date back to 1762, the date of publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education*.

The central premise of Rousseau's treatise is that children come into the world in a state of grace, endowed with an inherent goodness, which society degrades to make them adults. Consequently, the way to have a better society is to preserve the benign innocence of children, and what better way to achieve this than to free them from traditional education.

Following in the wake of Rousseau, and contradicting Aristotle's premise that only an educated mind can understand a thought different from its own, even without the need to accept it, those responsible for formulating contemporary public education have for decades persisted in interpreting the Stagirite's aphorism backwards, to the point where academic censorship has been normalized to protect students from ideas that are considered dangerous, wrapping them in bubbles of sentimentality, like someone wrapping a fragile clay figurine fresh from the oven, while successive educational laws have been loosening the burden of knowledge of philosophy, history, classical languages, literature or geography, in favor of practical and fragmentary skills that close more doors than they open, but that allow us to prolong the childhood of students by avoiding subjects and learning methods that disrupt the playfulness, spontaneity, and immediate gratification of the pupils.

But in order to seriously investigate this matter, it is necessary to go beyond the educational subjects, to situate ourselves in the very guts, which is the sphere of the fundamental principles from which the rights and duties of parents and children emanate. The interesting thing about descending to the level of natural law is that it allows us to isolate the question from political conjunctures, and defines it in timeless terms; without an expiration date, beyond ideology, and protected from cultural relativism.

Therefore, we will only mention in passing what is established in article 27 of the [Spanish Constitution](#) regarding the obligation of the State to guarantee that public education is consistent with the parents' own moral convictions, since this is not a Spanish debate, but a universal one. It is in this sense that it is useful to start with the basics, and add layers of complexity as we advance in the understanding of the problem, and not the other way around. In this sense, since we are talking about persons, it is worth noting that, as human beings, we are endowed with a distinctive and determined nature, from which

stem a series of faculties such as will, desire, conscience, reason and speech, which are subject to "normal" functional characteristics that are part of the natural law of the human being. An example of natural law is the determination to communicate our thoughts through speech. But unlike other living beings—also subject to their own natural laws—only human beings are free to make "abnormal" use of their functions.

We can, for example, use the faculty of speech to lie, and use our intellect to develop rationalizations to justify such behavior. But even this agency is determined by the natural law that makes us human, and so we develop a posteriori social constructs, such as morality and justice, to normatively constrain selfish impulses. Well, it is in this dichotomy where the essence of the two major political positions lies; the old discussion between those who defend the immutability of the human character, and those who maintain its malleability. And the fruit of this dialectical tension is positive law, a part of which concerns public education, and which affects three differentiable typologies: firstly, the learning of skills such as reading and writing; secondly, intellectual training; learning to learn; and finally, civic instruction; forming oneself as a full member of the community.

While the first two facets of the educational process are quantitative and objective, the third has a strong subjective and qualitative weight, based on a set of moral, ethical, religious, emotional, aesthetic, philosophical and cultural premises, in whose transmission the family occupies a preeminent place, which is disputed with the believers in the myth of the tabula rasa, present throughout the political spectrum. Unlike the latter, parents are not an abstract entity, but a biological reality, a natural law from which legal responsibilities derive, whose counterpart is the exercise of moral rights. These rights, as set forth in our constitution, as previously mentioned, include parental agency in the civic formation of children. This point is fundamental; it is the parents who delegate, conditionally, part of this formation to the school, without renouncing the authority that emanates from the aforementioned natural law.

Children are a subject of law; but the State is subsidiary to the parents, and its action should only prevail when objectively the integral wellbeing of the minor is at risk. Likewise, and as part of this implicit contract between family and school, parents should refrain from interfering in the work of teaching professionals regarding the intellectual development of their children, just as teachers should not indoctrinate their pupils or transmit value judgments. This virtuous balance is only attainable if the public authorities limit their intervention to complementing the authority that, according to natural law, parents have over the education of their children, which legitimizes them to allow the State to assume, not usurp, educational obligations towards their children.

That is to say, parents have natural obligations and rights towards their children, which precede the very existence of the political frameworks from which the State emanates, which never enjoys legitimacy to supplant the parental figure without reasons of force majeure, such as incapacity, orphanhood, negligence or abuse. However, parents and families do not live in a social vacuum, but are part of a public community; a State that exists to guarantee coexistence, facilitate conflict resolution and preserve the survival over time of a certain social model.

From this perspective, [according to John Rawls](#), there is a public reason, from which emerges the moral imperative to promote the common good, guarantee public order and combat injustice, promulgating positive law that legitimizes the State to regulate aspects of education that foster the civic development of students in the sense of Rawls' duty of civility, without undermining their individual rights or infringing on those of their parents, as we argued above. Among these rights, it is worth highlighting those of freedom of expression and conscience, inasmuch as they are consubstantial to what it really means to be human, and at the same time, they are the foundations on which social diversity is built, constructed with plural blocks, the basic unit of which is the family. Therefore, the public authorities must limit to the maximum the coercive capacity that allows them to contravene the right of conscience of parents by making decisions on behalf of their children, without the existence of a very broad social consensus, especially if the educational contents are based on sociological theories, ideologies or creeds that are not part of the common heritage, of that moral tradition to which we referred at the beginning of this paper.

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[Featured](#): *Sibyl*, by Diego Velázquez; painted ca. 1631.

