

ETHICS

Peddlers of Virtue

by Theodore Pappas

The recent controversy involving Olympic diving star Greg Louganis highlights more than the moral degeneracy of the latest poster boy for AIDS. When Louganis hit his head on the diving board and bled into the pool at the 1988 Olympics, the only honorable and morally just thing for him to do was to notify all concerned that he was HIV-positive. Instead, he chose to think only of himself, to save himself the embarrassment of revealing his dark secret, and to hide the truth about his medical state from both his fellow competitors and the doctor who treated his bloody wound without the protection of gloves.

The party line on this story, from the Establishment press, the medical community, and the Olympic hierarchy, was as predictable as the Speedo queen's sexual orientation. High and low did Olympic minions search for a rule that would have required Louganis to disclose his affliction, and having found none all sighed in collective relief and declared triumphantly: "He did nothing wrong." In fact, not only did "he do nothing wrong," but for jeopardizing the lives of dozens of people he became a man of "courage" and "conviction," the successor to Magic Johnson as the latest athlete to become a national hero as a result of acquiring a sexually transmitted disease.

Of course, what Louganis's many defenders actually mean by "he did nothing wrong" is that "he broke no law," and in the difference between the two—namely, in the deliberate distortion of the two, in the ascendancy of illicit as the barometer of iniquity—lies a story about the state of contemporary ethics.

Once upon a time man was not the

measure of all things, and morality, virtue, and acceptable behavior were judged by standards that transcended the ephemera of time and circumstance. Recent history, however, teaches a different lesson, and if we have learned nothing else from the general knavery of our leadership class, from the rogues and scoundrels of United Way and the NAACP, from the "public servants" who brought us ABSCAM, Contragate, Whitewater, and the endless Bimbogates of the current administration, it is that contemporary ethics are grounded in the here and now, in secular law. In assessing both public and private conduct today, the foremost concern is no longer whether the deed or intent was right or wrong, ignoble or just, but whether the behavior in question was strictly illegal or in violation of a bureaucratic code or organizational statute. As influence-peddler Michael Deaver explained in exculpation of his actions, what he did may have been unethical, but at least it wasn't illegal.

In healthier days, we turned to parents and clergy, literature and liturgy, for help in maneuvering with dignity through that labyrinth of temptation called everyday life. Whether Christian or pagan, we realized that a person's behavior had more to do with his character than with his collection of sheep skins, and that we could not buy better morals from a peddler of virtue—whether Sophist, college professor, or "ethics facilitator"—as we do fruit and vegetables at a country market. But the notion that moral turpitude might be tied more to character development than the forces of environment, education, or economics is not only irrelevant in our post-Christian age, but irreverent: it delegitimizes the entire multimillion-dollar industry that our crisis in conscience has spawned. Law schools, medical schools, and business schools are today replete with required classes in ethics, and municipal governments, local school boards, federal agencies, and corporations now routinely have paid ethicists on staff or hold periodic seminars conducted by "ethics specialists." As the gurus of fad diets and gut-busters

well know, only reform and redemption sell better than sin.

Among the most nationally famous of these professional Elmer Gantrys are Charles "Chuck" Colson and Jeb Stuart Magruder, now both ordained ministers. Though few people question the sincerity of these gentlemen's ministries, it is nevertheless a telling sign of the times when for moral guidance we now turn to the bunglers of Watergate. But it may well be the checkered pasts of such "experts" that prove most instructive. For they remind us of the question posed by Juvenal—*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*—about who will watch the

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watchmen, about the character of the men whom we rely on for instruction. It is this very question that comes to mind when considering the recent controversies involving Bill Bennett, undoubtedly the most popular peddler of virtue today.

The first controversy involves Bennett's prepared remarks this January before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Related Matters. Bennett appeared on Capitol Hill to call for the abolishment of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, the latter of which he directed in the 1980's. As Al Kamen of the *Washington Post* reported, Bennett recounted the difficulties he experienced at NEH in trying to establish a program that would promote traditional works of philosophy. "By the third year," Bennett said:

it was obvious that this program was going the way of all the others. The books were being Marxized, feminized, deconstructed and politicized. High-school teachers, far from being exposed to 'the best which has been taught and said in the world,' were being indoctrinated in the prevailing dogmas of academia.

According to Kamen, this passage "tracks" the remarks that historian Gertrude Himmelfarb made in an October article in *Commentary*. "Track," of course, is one of the many kind and gentle euphemisms for plagiarism, and this portion of Bennett's statement was a verbatim excerpt from Professor Himmelfarb's essay.

Bennett apparently had never seen the article in *Commentary*. As he later explained, Professor Himmelfarb had included this passage in a statement that she had intended to read before the same House committee. When she, Mrs. Kristol, decided not to appear, she reportedly "gave me [Bennett] her testimony and told me to use it as I saw fit . . . and she asked me not to cite it." Use it, Bennett did; cite it, he did not. "Is originality one of the virtues in the 'Book of Virtues'?" asked Kamen.

The second controversy involves Bennett's best-seller, *The Book of Virtues*. As the *New Yorker* reported in February, Bennett is really not the author of this book of moral tales: this honor goes to John Cribb, who was a speechwriter for

Bennett when the latter was Secretary of Education. According to the *New Yorker*, Bennett had Cribb working tirelessly on the book, but without remuneration:

Not to put too fine a point on it, [Bennett] was suffering from a small cash-flow embarrassment: he had long ago spent the advance on his two-book deal with Simon & Schuster. Being a great man, though, William had an idea: if John would stick with the project for a year, William would give John about a third of any profits that the resulting *Book of Virtues* earned. . . . [T]he noble (indeed, the downright virtuous) William kept his promise. At thirty dollars per book, and if Bennett is receiving in royalties the fifteen percent that is standard in publishing, John's piece of the action would appear to have netted the once unassuming ghost-scribe well over two million dollars.

With the book already in its 34th printing, and with the foreign language royalties and subsidiary rights assuring a constant flow of profits for many years to come, it is safe to assume that never again will Cribb and Bennett suffer a "cash-flow embarrassment." As Bennett puts it, "Let's just say we're both happy about this. I'm happy and John's happy. John's *really* happy."

Both controversies involving Bennett share a certain moral obtuseness. Like Greg Louganis's situation, not only did Mr. Bennett have information he preferred to keep out of the public domain, albeit information of less social significance than Louganis's, but no law required Bennett to disclose his information, either about the true source of his public testimony or the true author of his book. In fact, regarding his testimony on Capitol Hill, Bennett was not legally guilty of plagiarism, as Professor Himmelfarb had reportedly given him permission to use her work. But permission doth not a virtuous act make. An adulteress may encourage a paramour and thereby grant "permission" to assist in the adultery, but a man of virtue would resist the temptress nonetheless. Nor would a man of integrity willingly deceive others by putting off the work of others as one's own and then later declare, when tripped up in the deception, "I was told I could do it."

Neither would a man of virtue, particularly one widely regarded as a scholar and man of letters, mislead the public as to the true author of a book that has brought him such astounding fame and fortune. Now, ghostwriting is an age-old method of publishing for the rich and untalented, and without it America would never have had a Pulitzer Prize-winning "author" become President. But few political and cultural leaders have ever had a ghostwritten book as wildly popular and profitable as Bill Bennett's, and when the topic of the best-seller is honesty and forthrightness, morality and virtue, one naturally begins to wonder about the credibility of its "author."

Again, no law required Bennett to reveal the actual extent of Cribb's "assistance," but the honorable act would not have been to bury mention of Cribb in a foreword to the book, but to have listed Cribb, at the very least, as coauthor or coeditor. Even Hollywood tarts and monosyllabic sport stars have perfected a more honest method of "writing" than that exhibited by Bennett. Their autobiographies do often fall short on the *auto* end of things, but at least they come clean with the public on the covers of their books: *My Life* by Mike Tyson, "Written in crayon with the assistance of . . ."

Perhaps these controversies involving Mr. Bennett are not so much evidence of deceit and deception as proof of a penchant for doing the bare minimum. After all, Bennett's dissertation entitled "Societal Obligation," for which he received a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin in 1970, was hardly longer than many master's theses. Its text, including introduction, summary, and conclusion, is only 129 pages. His bibliography, in which he cites numerous secondary sources as well as his use of the *New York Times Encyclopedia Almanac*, extends only two lines beyond a single page. In fact, his biography of himself in his "Vita" encompasses 20 lines, which is more than the 13 total works listed in his bibliography.

The text of his dissertation is no more impressive. The chapters are largely recapitulations of the ideas of prominent moral philosophers. He begins with a summary of H. A. Prichard's *Moral Obligation*, and the first 12 footnotes are citations from different chapters of Prichard's book. He later summarizes W. D. Ross's *The Right and the Good*

(from which he pulls eight consecutive quotations) and an article by William K. Frankena. Much the same occurs in Chapter Two, where 45 of the 48 footnotes derive from a *single* source, Lon Fuller and Robert Braucher's *Basic Contract Law*. Chapter Three has eight footnotes, in one of which Bennett asserts that what "has not received much attention in contemporary thinking is Rousseau's theory [of social contract]!" In Chapter Four he summarizes Socrates and quotes extensively from the works of Plato, using the editions translated by . . . Edith Hamilton. Chapter Five consists of his summary (of his summaries) and conclusions from his summaries.

Some parts of Bennett's thesis seem like nothing more than an elaboration on Frankena's article. As indicated in its title, "Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy," Frankena's essay deals with the very subject of Bennett's dissertation. In fact, Frankena discusses the work of both Prichard and Ross and then concludes that their philosophies are too narrowly defined. This just happens to be Bennett's conclusion, and throughout his dissertation, from start to finish, one finds a simple reiteration of Frankena's arguments: "As Frankena recommends . . ."; "[The thesis will] broaden the boundaries of the inquiry in a way recommended by Frankena . . ."; ". . . as Frankena would recommend . . ."; "We have taken Frankena's advice and . . ."; "Again we could say with Frankena . . ." The dissertation ends up reading more like an undergraduate term paper than an original work of scholarship.

That a project so lean in size and substance could qualify as a dissertation should perhaps not surprise us. One of the advisors who signed and approved his thesis was John Silber, the president of the institution that so botched the investigation of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s plagiarized dissertation, Boston University. (Silber, by the way, has just anointed his successor at B.U.: it's Jon Westling, who in 1990 said in a letter to *Chronicles* about King's bogus B.U. thesis that "not a single reader has ever found any nonattributed or misattributed quotations, misleading paraphrases, or thoughts borrowed without due scholarly reference in any of its 343 pages.")

Perhaps the most interesting part of Bennett's dissertation is its epigraph.

"Boys, a gentleman always rises when a lady enters a room. He must. A gentleman keeps his obligations, even in Hell." This is certainly true, but in light of Bennett's recent chicanery, one is reminded instead of the "infallible rule" of R. S. Surtees, that "the man who is always talking about being a gentleman never is one." The question is whether the same holds true for declaimers of virtue.

Theodore Pappas is the managing editor of Chronicles.

FILM

Littler Women by Laurie Morrow

Little Women

Produced by Denise DiNovi

Directed by Gillian Armstrong

Based on the book by Louisa May Alcott

Screenplay by Robin Swicord

Released by Columbia Pictures

As the recent effort to remake *Little Women* suggests, Hollywood has remembered that an almost certain way to make a profitable film is to turn a best-selling children's classic into a movie. After all, when Hollywood makes family films, entire families buy tickets, as well as popcorn, sodas, and candy, and replacements for what the kids spill, devour, or quarrel over while the movie's running. Unlike artsy-grotesque films, movies which appeal to families also enjoy profits from movie tie-in products (try marketing a Hannibal Lecter Happy Meal). Among Hollywood's oldest traditions is modifying these classics to insure good box office sales. A 1930's version of *Moby Dick*, for example, has Ahab saved by the love of a good woman; and when discussing the casting of apostles for a film version of *The Last Supper*, Samuel Goldwyn is said to have exclaimed, "Why only twelve?—Go out and get *thousands!*" In the past, moviemakers modified stories to make them more entertaining; now, however, they modify plot and characterization for political purposes.

Hollywood still does not quite grasp what it is about literary classics that attracts the general public. The film industry regards these stories, whose appeal extends across generations and geography, not as fully articulated works of art which express a coherent vision but as loose scenarios into which stars can be plugged and through which they can articulate their fashionable politics.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Columbia Pictures' recent reinvention of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Alcott's 1868 novel teaches a number of important moral lessons, most of which Columbia Pictures hurls overhand out the window. This is a pity, as *Little Women* offers a feminist view of life—an unfashionable feminism, admittedly, one grounded in self-reliance, endurance, and commitment rather than in a politically correct scramble for "privileged victim" status. Their "self-esteem" firmly intact, Alcott's young women are less apt to remind us of Gloria Steinem than of Katharine Hepburn, who, in 1933, starred in George Cukor's more faithful interpretation of the novel. Alcott demonstrates that a woman can choose the kind of life she wishes to lead, provided she recognize and emend her character flaws and not compromise her ideals.

Little Women was, after all, intended to be edifying as well as entertaining: John Bunyan's religious allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* provides the novel's structural framework as well as the source for several chapters' titles and themes (e.g., "Playing Pilgrims," "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair"). Good minister's daughter that she was, Alcott created four recognizable types of young women, each of whom must overcome some weakness in her character in order to move from childhood to maturity. Meg is responsible but proud; Jo, talented but stubborn; Beth, sensitive but overly shy; and Amy, charming but vain. Each endures many tests of character, including financial problems, conflicts with family, friends, and lovers, and the illnesses and deaths of loved ones. Ultimately, though each retains her essential nature, the four "little women" become responsible, mature adults through self-discipline, hard work, and mutual devotion. Most importantly, Jo, the focal point of the action, refuses to marry until she finds a man who takes her intellectual and artistic aspirations seriously.

Now, this may seem a sturdy enough