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BERTRAND DE JOUVENEL

THE CONSERVATIVE LIBERAL AND
THE ILLUSIONS OF MODERNITY

Daniel J. Mahoney
ASSUMPTION COLLEGE

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PREFACE

BERTRAND DE JOUVENEL (1903–87) is one of a small number of twentieth-century political thinkers who truly matter, who are worthy of our continuing respect and attention. Yet his name is largely unknown in fashionable intellectual circles today, and his work has not come close to receiving the recognition it so richly merits. This book is above all an act of intellectual recovery, an effort to rectify the unwarranted neglect of one of the most thoughtful and humane political thinkers of the previous century.

A study of Jouvenel's thought necessarily entails a confrontation with the moral and political substance of the twentieth century since that "political milieu"—so "rife with political occurrences"—presented Jouvenel with much of the material on which he reflected.¹ From the beginning, Jouvenel was not content merely to make sense of his own situation or to anticipate the "possible futures" that lay before our democratic societies. He freely spoke of the "common good," "social friendship," and the "amenities of life,"

even as he attempted to come to terms with the political and intellectual pathologies that did so much to mar the last century of the second millennium. He defended the considerable achievements of the modern liberal democratic order but was dissatisfied with the anemic account of human nature and human motives that characterized the most influential currents of modern thought.

Jouvenel appealed to an older tradition of European reflection that affirmed the social nature of man and recognized the numerous reasons human beings have to be grateful for their civilized patrimony. The French political philosopher and social scientist was a conservative liberal who steered a principled middle path between reactionary nostalgia and progressive illusions, a student of man and society who never lost sight either of the truths that endure or of the essentially “dynamic” character of modern civilization. Jouvenel envisioned the diverse ways in which the permanent goods and truths of our nature could be sustained within an ever-changing and mobile social order. Against reactionaries and progressives alike, he resisted the temptation to put an end to things. There was no more penetrating critic of “the myth of the solution,”² of the pernicious illusion that the political problem could be permanently solved rather than prudently navigated or adjudicated. Jouvenel’s unique blend of erudition, sobriety, urbanity, and civility has much to teach a “postmodern” age that has largely forgotten the moral and intellectual foundations of restraint, moderation, and intelligent deference to the wisdom of the past. He remains our contemporary in no small part because he was never unduly concerned with being relevant or up-to-date in his intellectual stances.

This book is on one level a continuation of my engagement with the French twentieth century (I have previously authored studies of Raymond Aron and Charles de Gaulle). It is also a continuation of my work on a series of thinkers (e.g., Aurel Kolnai, Pierre Manent, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn) who attempted to come to terms with both modern liberty and modern tyranny while doing justice to those “moral contents of life” that late modernity has so much difficulty affirming and sustaining. For his part, Jouvenel was a penetrating critic of twentieth-century tyranny and a qualified but genuine friend of the regime of modern liberty. His judgment was ultimately less steady and reliable than Aron’s, but in some ways he surpassed his friend in philosophical depth and penetration. It is my deeply held conviction that these two great defenders of European liberty will be read long after Sartre, Althusser, Bourdieu, and Foucault have been relegated to the realm of ideological criticism, the fate of thinkers who will remain of interest primarily because their thought is so bereft of moral bearings or of an elementary sense of political responsibility. What Jouvenel once wrote about Aristotle, St. Thomas, and Montesquieu can be said with equal justice about both him and Aron: “in them is substance, and nothing of them is divorced from reality.”³

Aristotle’s god may be “thought thinking itself” but we mortals are, happily, sustained by community, conversation, and the generosity of friends and family. I have learned from Jouvenel the numerous ways in which every reflective human being must take himself for debtor. My family, particularly my mother and my now-departed father, has always provided unflagging support, love, and encouragement. Paul Seaton read every word in this book and pro-

vided invaluable suggestions, both editorial and substantive, along the way. My former student David DesRosiers, now vice president of the Manhattan Institute, wrote his dissertation on Jouvenel and has never lost his enthusiasm for someone he rightly regards as an intellectual treasure. David's enthusiasm for all things Jouvenelian has been truly infectious. Philippe Bénéton, Pierre Manent, Irving Louis Horowitz, and Peter Lawler have provided continuous friendship, sage advice, and much encouragement for me to bring Jouvenel's achievement to the attention of a broader public audience. Brian Anderson, Stephen Gardner, Ralph Hancock, Marc Guerra, and Nalin Ranasinghe have been trusted interlocutors on every aspect of political and intellectual life. I am grateful to them and other friends, including the members of our small fraternity of Solzhenitsyn aficionados, who help make the intellectual life a joy rather than a chore or a mere profession. I would also like to thank Janet Truscott and Carmella Murphy, who provided invaluable help with computer-related issues and greatly facilitated the appearance of the manuscript. No expression of my debts would be complete without mentioning the Earhart Foundation of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Under the leadership first of David Kennedy and now of Ingrid Gregg, Earhart has provided generous support for my various scholarly endeavors. Timely grants from that foundation have given me the leisure to complete this book as well as my earlier works on Aron, de Gaulle, and Solzhenitsyn. The Earhart Foundation has consistently shown itself to be a friend of liberal learning and of conservative liberal thought in its various forms.

A final word of thanks is owed to my editor Jeremy Beer. It is a delight to have an editor who not only is deeply conversant with

ideas but who promotes their clear and efficacious expression. I am happy to count Jeremy among my friends.

A version of chapter 3 appeared in the *Political Science Reviewer* (volume 32, 2003, 93–117) and in French translation as “Liberté et bien commun chez Bertrand de Jouvenel” in *Commentaire* (number 103, Autumn 2003, 623–35). In chapter 1, I have freely drawn on several paragraphs of my introduction (written in conjunction with David M. DesRosiers) to the 1997 Liberty Fund edition of *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Political Good*. I am grateful to all concerned for permission to reprint these materials.

Daniel J. Mahoney
Worcester, Massachusetts
October 29, 2004

ABBREVIATIONS

- ER *The Ethics of Redistribution* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1990). Originally published by Cambridge University Press in 1952.
- OP *On Power: The Natural History of Its Growth* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1993). Translated by J. F. Huntington. English-language edition originally published by Viking Press in 1948.
- PT *The Pure Theory of Politics* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2000). Originally published in the United States by Yale University Press in 1963.
- S *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Political Good* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1997). Translated by J. F. Huntington. English-language edition originally published in the United States by the University of Chicago Press in 1957.