

Why We're Headed for a 'Nanny State'

Americans love freedom. Or so they like to say.

So why do we have more and more laws and an ever-expanding public sector? Why is our behavior increasingly regulated and restricted at almost every level? Why, in other words, is the state becoming our nanny?

Our Daniel Lattier [answered](#) the first question last month: We are evolving away from being a “virtue-based” to a “rule-based” society. Thus:

“The virtue-based society is found among peoples that emphasize small communities with definite identities and shared principles. The rule-based society, however, is a necessity where the two realities are big government and the individual.”

In contemporary America, communities and forms of social organization that stand between the individual and government seem to be weakening. Thus “civil society”—consisting of all those forms of association between the individual and government that form people and give substance to their lives—is shrinking as the power of those two poles grows. So even as we have more and more individual freedom in terms of mobility, consumer choice, religion, and sexual behavior, we need more and more laws and rules to keep from stepping on each other's toes. The dissipation of civil society thus [threatens liberty](#).

As implied, the solution to this paradox is virtue. But what, exactly, is this “virtue” that's supposedly a healthy basis for the entire social fabric, and is fostered best within small communities with definite identities and shared

principles?

A “virtue” is an admirable character trait such as honesty, kindness, integrity, good judgment, etc. The tradition of “[virtue ethics](#),” which stems largely from Aristotle, even develops an account of the four “cardinal” virtues, i.e. the four that contain all the rest: *prudence* (or “*practical wisdom*”), *justice*, *temperance*, and *fortitude*. A “virtuous” or good person is one whose character exhibits the cardinal virtues and therefore a rich, interlocking set of other virtues. Such a person lives and acts as a human being should.

Thus they are fulfilled as a distinctively human being. They have not only achieved a state of blessedness or happiness understood as human flourishing (the word virtue ethicists use for that is the Greek *eudaimonia*); they’ve done so precisely by being disposed to act as a good person *ought* to act in various situations. For that reason they can reliably govern themselves in most cases. They don’t need huge tomes of laws and rules to tell them how to live.

Now in small communities with shared principles, there’s always some consensus about what the virtuous person is. Some consensus of that sort is necessary to form virtuous people.

But in America today, there’s very little consensus about what human “virtue” is. Everybody can admire this-or-that character trait, as well as a few individuals who exemplify the most admired traits. But there’s no longer any clear, consensual understanding of what the human person is *for*, and thus of what would fulfill the human person, simply as human person. That makes it ever harder to form the sorts of people who, as virtuous people, don’t need all that many laws and explicit rules to regulate their behavior. And so we need ever more laws and rules, backed with the state’s legal monopoly on coercion.

Many of us dislike the reality that currently meets that need.

But as the dissipation of the virtue-based society proceeds apace, more and more people prove unwilling and/or unable to govern themselves as individuals and families.

So we have made inevitable the very thing we dislike, namely, a nanny state.