

Learning About Authority While Flying Without Engines

I am learning to fly sailplanes.

It is a fine hobby for someone who enjoys an adrenaline rush. I feel like a little kid, a 48-year-old kid, when I am coming in on final approach and know that there is no throttle which can be advanced, no engine upon which I might rely.

There is just gravity, a glide path and the energy stored up in height and velocity, the graceful lines of the sailplane gliding toward the almost mile-long grass strip at Puckett Field in Eagleville, Tennessee.

Sitting in the cockpit before our second or third tow one day, my instructor asked me to run through the checklist. He is a very fine instructor, and I come away every time having learned something.

I was particularly pleased in the immediate flight prior to have learned how to do wing-overs, a marvelously graceful move in a sailplane, which makes a novice like me feel all of a sudden like I'm flying a fighter jet.

So I dutifully and quickly ran through the checklist. "Ready," I said.

"There is one thing you've left untended that will kill us," he simply replied.

I ran through the checklist again and realized I had failed to lock the spoilers, devices that extend vertically from the top side of a wing for the purpose of "spoiling" the lift generated by a wing.

They are typically used during a landing to assist the pilot in landing at the desired spot, but try to take off with those things unlocked and they will pop out when you get a little ways down the runway - to ill and possibly deadly effect.

The nonjudgmental, factual, non-shaming way my instructor said what he said - "There is one thing you've left untended that will kill us" - is an example, I think, of rightful and good authority.

This experience reminded me of a beautiful autumn day on the Notre Dame

campus, sitting alongside the reflecting pool that sits below the 14-story-high mosaic popularly called "Touchdown Jesus," re-reading some passages from Alasdair MacIntyre's book, "After Virtue," when I came across one particular line that made that beautiful day memorable: We are all, he asserted, legalists in the modern era.

"Legalist" does not mean "conservative," or even some mode of theologically oriented "works-righteousness."

Instead, MacIntyre was taking aim at the "legalist" who sees a rule as an end in and of itself.

In modernity, as MacIntyre has famously argued time and again, we stopped thinking about life and morality having an end, a purpose or a "telos," to use the term the Greek philosophers employed.

For the ancients - both biblical and Greco-Romans - virtues were not merely timeless universal rules that simply had to be kept in order to be "moral."

Instead, virtues - skills, habits, dispositions - were always intended to help a practitioner move toward the desired end.

Also of significance, different communities and traditions, MacIntyre argued, have different sets of virtues because they have different conceptions of the end or "telos" for which life is being lived, or a given endeavor is being pursued.

As one example, consider the different virtues embodied in the practices of soldiering or playing basketball; or consider the different virtues typically embodied among the Japanese as opposed to citizens of the United States.

Those different virtues arise from different conceptions of what the purpose of life is, or the purpose of the particular endeavor.

In such a scenario, authority is then, not something to be avoided in principle. But for any good modernist, authority (and tradition) typify the great foe.

For the modernist, autonomy - self-rule - is the gold standard.

"'Have the courage to use your own reason.' That is the motto of the Enlightenment," Immanuel Kant said. Thus, authority becomes increasingly

suspicious, in and of itself, for the modernist.

Any authority from outside oneself gets a nasty sounding name: heteronomy. Unless one wants to be an arcane premodern, then heteronomy is surely to be avoided.

But for MacIntyre, and for me in learning to fly sailplanes, in learning to live a life worthy of the name, authority now sounds much less a foe in and of itself.

I am not advocating some sort of mindless “return to authority.” Instead, it is a more honest appreciation of the fact that, even in our assertions of “autonomy,” we are still living according to various forms of authority, various presuppositions shaped by varied traditions.

Instead, the question becomes whether it is good authority or bad authority; and this is a question that can typically be answered by considering the fruit of the life or community under consideration.

And often, such concerns may, in fact, be a matter of life or death, even when as simple as checking well the checklist prior to take off.

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