

Citizen Ethics in a Time of Crisis

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Foreword

Philip Pullman

Virtue. At first sight, of course, vice is more attractive. She is sexier, she promises to be better company than her plain sister virtue. Every novelist, and every reader too, has more fun with the villains than with the good guys. Goodness is staunch and patient, but wickedness is vivid and dynamic; we admire the first, but we thrill to the second.

Nevertheless, I want to say a word in praise of virtue: the quality or qualities that enable a nation and its citizens to live well, by which I mean morally well.

And to see what virtue looks like, we need to look not to lists of laws and commandments, but to literature. Was a lesson on the importance of kindness ever delivered more devastatingly, or learned more securely, than Mr Knightley's reproof of Emma in the novel that bears her name? Was the value of play in childhood (a profoundly ethical matter) ever more memorably conveyed than by Dickens's description of the Smallweed children in *Bleak House*?

The house of Smallweed ... has strengthened itself in its practical character, has discarded all amusements, discountenanced all story-books, fairy tales, fictions and fables, and banished all levities altogether. Hence the gratifying fact, that it has had no child born to it, and that the complete little men and women whom it has produced, have been observed to bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds.

The lesson of every story in which the good is illustrated is, as Jesus said after telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, 'Go, and do thou likewise.' The genius of Jesus – and Jane Austen, and Dickens, and every other storyteller whose tales are as memorable – gives us no excuse to say we don't know what the good looks like.

When it comes to public virtue, William Blake's great poem *Auguries of Innocence* reminds us in forthright and indeed prophetic terms that the personal and the political are one:

A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State.
A Horse misus'd upon the Road
Calls to Heaven for Human blood ...
The wanton Boy that kills the Fly
Shall feel the Spider's enmity.

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◀ And, in a couplet the Blair government should have remembered before licensing the creation of super-casinos,

The Whore & Gambler, by the State
Licens'd, build that Nation's Fate.

In fact, ethical guidance is something we have never actually been short of. Those who insist that all ethical teaching must be religious in origin are talking nonsense. Some of it is: much of it isn't.

But when it comes to public or political virtues, are there any in particular that ought to characterise a virtuous state? I can think of three that would make a good start.

The first is courage. Courage is foundational: it's what we need so as to be able to act kindly even when we're afraid, in order to exercise good and steady judgment even in the midst of confusion and panic, in order to deal with long-term necessity even when short-term expediency would be easier. A courageous nation would not be afraid of its own newspapers, or toady to their proprietors; it would continue to do what was right even when loud voices were urging it to do wrong. It would stand up to economic interests when others were more important, and yes, there are interests that are more important than short-term economic benefits. And when it came to the threat of external danger, a courageous nation would take a clear look at the danger and take realistic steps to avert it. It would not take up a machine-gun to defend itself against a wasp.

The second virtue I want to praise is modesty. Modesty in a nation consists among other things of fitting the form to the meaning, and not mistaking style for substance. A modest kingdom, for instance, would have to think for a moment to remember whether or not it was a republic, because the members of the royal family would be allowed to spend most of their time in useful and interesting careers as well as being royal, and their love affairs would remain their own business; and people would always be glad to see them cycling past. Acquiring modesty in our public life would be a big step towards developing a realistic sense of our size and position in the world.

The third virtue I'd like to see in a nation (all right: in our nation, now) is intellectual curiosity. Wakefulness of mind might be another term for it. A nation with that quality would be conscious of itself and of its history, and of every thread that made up the tapestry of its culture. It would believe that the highest knowledge of itself had been expressed by its artists, its writers and poets, and it would teach its children how to know and how to love their work, believing that this activity would give them, the children, an important part to play in the self-knowledge and memory of the nation. A nation where this virtue was strong would be active and enquiring of mind, quick to perceive and compare and consider. Such a nation would know at once when a government tried to interfere with its freedoms. It would remember how all those freedoms had been gained, because each one would have a story attached to it, and an attack on any of them would feel like a personal affront. That's the value of wakefulness. ▶

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◀ To finish I want to say something briefly about how virtue manifests itself in daily life, local life. I saw two little things recently that give me hope that the spirit of common, public, civic virtue is still alive in this nation of ours when people are free to act without interference.

The first is an example of ‘folk traffic calming’. People living in a residential road in Oxford, home to a lot of families and children, a road which normally functions as a rat-run for cars, recently decided to take matters into their own hands and demonstrate that the street is a place for everyone, not just for people in large heavy mobile steel objects. They set up a living-room right in the road, with a sofa, a carpet, a coffee table, and held a tea-party. They parked their own cars in a chevron formation all the way along the road, and put planters containing bushes and small trees there too to calm the traffic down. They set up a walk-in petrol addiction clinic. The result was that cars could easily get through, but drivers couldn’t see clear from one end of the road to the other and didn’t feel it was just for driving along at 30 miles an hour. Everyone shared the whole space. It was a triumph: wit in the service of a decent human standard of life.

The second thing I saw was a television programme. It was about the work done by Michael Rosen when he was Children’s Laureate, a project he undertook with a school in South Wales where books had been undervalued. He showed the children, and the teachers, and the parents the profound value of reading and all it could do to deepen and enrich their lives, and he did so not by following curriculum guidelines and aiming at targets and putting the children through tests, but by beginning with delight. Enchantment. Joy. The librarians there were practically weeping with relief and pleasure at seeing so many children now coming in to search the shelves and sit and read and talk about the books they’re enjoying.

But I seem to be describing delight. Is that a virtue too? Well, it’s like the canary in a coal mine: while it continues to sing, we know the great public virtue of liberty is still alive. A nation whose laws express fear and suspicion and hostility cannot sustain delight for very long. If joy goes, freedom is in danger.

So I would say that to sustain the virtue of a nation, we need to remember how the private connects with the public, the poetic with the political. We need to praise and cherish every example we can find of imaginative play, of the energy of creation, of the enchantment of art and the wonder of science. A nation that was brave, and modest, and curious sounds to me like one that understood that if it told its children stories, they might grow up to feel that virtue was in fact as interesting as vice.

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Philip Pullman is a best-selling, award-winning novelist and author of the His Dark Materials trilogy. Part of this article comes from a speech he gave at the 2009 Convention on Liberty

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INTRODUCTION

Fanning the flames of a vital debate

MADELEINE BUNTING

The financial and political events of the past year have given rise to a crisis of ethics. Bankers and MPs acted legally but without integrity, and we lacked a language to respond. How are we to articulate our misgivings? How can we regain our ability to reason ethically?

In a poll for the World Economic Forum last month, two thirds of people across ten G20 countries believed that the economic recession had been caused by a crisis of ethics and values. This kind of response – often accompanied by a sense of incredulous outrage – has been a recurrent theme of the last eighteen months. The financial crisis has been compounded in the UK by the MPs' expenses scandal which has badly damaged trust in the political system.

In both cases, the issue was not criminal behaviour – for the most part people did not break laws – but a perception that individuals did not exercise basic ethical judgments about how they worked, what constituted appropriate rewards and their responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The poll finding indicates that there is still a widespread public expectation that those in positions of political and economic power should demonstrate integrity.

But there is also a broader set of anxieties that this is not about individual failings but something more systemic. Have institutional cultures so lost their moorings that they fail to promote the ethics, such as honesty, essential to their own survival? Indeed, was the ethos of these institutions so distorted that they legitimised the sense of entitlement with which bankers took massive risks to earn bonuses, and the politicians used every possible receipt to boost their earnings? How could institutions as ►

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INTRODUCTION

‘It is not a manifesto, it is an argument we have left derelict, a crucial public concern’

◀ fundamental to the stability of our political economy as banks and parliament have allowed a culture of personal enrichment which was blindly reckless to the consequences? These questions will dog the next decade as the country painfully struggles to pay the price.

The law offers no mechanism to redress the injustice of bankers taking million-pound bonuses while small businesses, starved of credit, go to the wall. A technocratic managerialism has become the focus: how could a better regulatory framework prevent a repeat? Though necessary, this won't address the question of ethos, a territory of human motivation and behaviour beyond external regulation's reach.

Hence, fundamental questions of justice persist, but without any purchase on public debate. This is what the crisis of ethics is really about: we have no language to use. ‘This is wrong’ has long since ceased to have validity as a political statement: terms of judgment rooted in moral systems are no longer much shared. We have lost understanding – and perhaps patience – with the process of reasoning in which we have to decide what is just. We abdicated much of that task to the market and lazily assumed justice follows. Now, we are finally being forced to acknowledge the gap.

This was the nub of the argument put forward by Michael Sandel in his Reith Lectures last May. He claimed that the capacity for ethical reasoning essential to justice has been largely abandoned for a generation. ‘You can't trump the market’ declared Margaret Thatcher, and no one since has disagreed. This was the adage which effectively exonerated banking pay levels soaring away from average earnings. Restraint would only cripple the UK financial sector, we were told. The social cost of runaway wealth and ensuing inequality was not relevant.

Equally, low wages were determined by the market – only slightly modified by a minimum wage – even if they were not sufficient to support families. Ethical reasoning simply had no place in determining major decisions about the run-

ning of an economy. Admiration for the efficiency of the market ensured that its mechanisms were extended into many areas of the public sector, mimicking the processes of choice. Ethics was marginalised as an add-on extra; ‘values’ are frequently asserted by corporations or government departments, but they ring hollow. They sit uneasily alongside imperatives such as making a profit or being cost effective, which too often leave values compromised. Values become a form of spin.

It was this sense that a language was missing with which to describe recent events – a way of analysing and explaining what has gone wrong and why – that prompted this initiative, Citizen Ethics. It is not a manifesto, it is an argument that we have left derelict, a vital aspect of public debate. That the capacity to reason ethically is not an obscure philosopher's game but is fundamental to most people's lives: what is the right thing to do? The answer requires reflection, trade-offs; it may not be easy. There are no ready-made principles. Rooted in an understanding of what constitutes human flourishing, it's an ongoing practice or skill, calling those in power to account, and a way of articulating what we expect of them. It prompts better questions, provokes necessary debates.

To put it another way, we have lost a capacity to connect our private ethical experience to a wider public conversation. As Miriam Stoppard reflects, she had never thought about the issue before, but every day of her life is about the practice of ethics. How is it that something so central drops below the radar of public debate?

Perhaps part of the problem lies with the vexed legacy of institutional religion and the long shadow it still casts over us. The promotion of virtue and ethical behaviour – morality – has been bound up with particular institutions and, as they decline, it leaves a vacuum of authority. Who dares talk on this subject with confidence? It prompts fear that any such discussions are really a Trojan horse for promoting faith. There's a suspicion that words such as morality tip ▶

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INTRODUCTION

‘The times call for new ethical understandings as much as remembering old ones’

◀ us quickly into the kind of instinctive conviction made infamous by Tony Blair in which sincerity is regarded as a substitute for careful reasoning. But since most of the contributors to this pamphlet express their commitment to ethics without any reference to religious practice, it seems possible to finally move beyond these familiar anxieties and resume a task of ethical reasoning regarded through most of history as essential to being human.

Ethics is a word which derives from two Greek words, *ethos* for habit and *ethikos* for character; citizen ethics is about opening up civic space outside of the state and the market to consider the kinds of habits and characters we need to run the good society.

This is not a nostalgia project of returning to some mythical golden age. We do not argue that there has been some overall comprehensive decline, only that we have lost the way to talk about important issues. Yes, there are ethics which command much less respect than in the past; Lord Bingham’s anecdote here of his father never using his office phone for a personal call is a striking reminder of ethics we have lost. But in contrast, our awareness of global interdependence, our concerns for fair trade and the environment are all evidence of an ethics of which earlier generations were ignorant. The times call for new ethical understandings as much as remembering old ones. Take a familiar injunction like ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’. It requires a huge effort to re-imagine what it might mean when neighbour is now a concept not just for the village or the street but for the planet, for the web; what do we owe our unseen and unknowable neighbour? In this pamphlet, writers give some pointers towards the imagining of a new ethics.

Significantly, the one area of public debate in which ethics have become a familiar and much-used term has been sustainability. A strand of environmentalism has relentlessly pushed forward the concept of individual responsibility and the need for practical concrete actions in

daily life – less flights, better home insulation, more public transport. Bound up with this is the most persistent questioning of the assumptions of the good life promoted by consumer capitalism as one of continuous material acquisition. As the Skidelskys, father and son, rightly ponder, Keynes imagined much more for his grandchildren when he optimistically predicted that the ‘art of living’ would replace the toil of labour for material wellbeing.

But such notions as the ‘art of living’ have been privatised; the assumption is that we prize our freedom to pursue our own vision of the art of living without guidance or interference. Charges of paternalism and elitism have stymied even a conversation on the subject of what constitutes human flourishing. What emerges in this vacuum is a set of values – success, wealth, celebrity recognition, aspiration – which may dazzle and entertain but ultimately delude their audience in cruel mythologies of exceptionalism and the winner takes all, as Libby Brooks writes.

The contributors have sharp disagreements. There is consensus on freedom as the fundamental grounding of ethics, but debate over how that freedom is shaped, safeguarded, expanded or used. Sandel saw that when he called for honest interrogation of the assumptions on which political arguments rest, the result would be noisy. This is a bid to kickstart that noisy argument. It makes no claim to be comprehensive or definitive – only to provoke the right questions. That is how one starts to get better answers.

Credits

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PART ONE • How do we decide our values?

WE NEED A PUBLIC LIFE WITH PURPOSE

KEY NOTES MICHAEL SANDEL

As frustration with politics builds on both sides of the Atlantic, we must seize the chance to explore a new politics of the common good

How can we achieve a just society? Much of our political debate assumes that the answer to this question is simply to maximize happiness or to respect each individual's freedom of choice. But happiness and choice are not enough. To achieve a just society, we have to reason together about the meaning of the good life, and create a public culture hospitable to the disagreements that will inevitably arise.

It is tempting to seek a principle or procedure that could justify, once and for all, whatever distribution of income or power or opportunity resulted from it. Such a principle, if we could find it, would enable us to avoid the tumult and contention that arguments about the good life invariably arouse. But these arguments are impossible to avoid. Justice is inescapably judgmental. Whether we're arguing about financial bailouts and bankers' bonuses, or the growing gap between rich and poor, or how to contend with the environmental costs of economic growth, questions of justice are bound up with competing notions of honour, virtue, and the common good. Justice is not only about the right way to distribute things. It is also about the right way to value things.

So if a just society involves reasoning together about the good life, it also raises the question of what kind of political discourse would point us in this direction. I don't have a fully worked out answer to this, but I can offer a few illustrative suggestions.

First, an observation: today most of our political arguments revolve around welfare and freedom – increasing economic output and respecting people's rights. For many, talk of virtue in politics brings to mind religious conservatives telling people how to live. But this is not the only way that conceptions of virtue and the common good can inform politics. The challenge is to imagine a politics that takes moral and spiritual questions seriously, and brings them to bear on broad economic and civic concerns.

During the 2008 American presidential campaign,

Barack Obama managed to do this. He tapped Americans' hunger for a public life of larger purpose and articulated a politics of moral and spiritual aspiration. During the first year of his presidency, he has found it difficult to translate this politics of aspiration into governance. At a time of financial crisis and recession, this is no easy task. So, as frustration with politics builds on both sides of the Atlantic, it is worth asking what a new politics of the common good might look like. Here are four possible themes.

A first concerns citizenship, sacrifice and service. If a just society requires a strong sense of community, it must find a way to cultivate in citizens a concern for the whole, a dedication to the common good. It can't be indifferent to the attitudes and dispositions, the 'habits of the heart,' that citizens bring to public life. It must find a way to challenge purely privatised notions of the good life, and cultivate civic virtue.

Traditionally, schools have been sites of civic education. In some generations, the military has been another. I'm referring not mainly to the explicit teaching of civic virtue, but to the practical, often inadvertent civic education that takes place when young people from different economic classes and ethnic communities come together in common institutions. It is a serious question how a democratic society that is cosmopolitan and disparate can hope to cultivate the solidarity and sense of mutual responsibility that a just society requires – though this question has recently reappeared in our political discourse, at least to some extent.

A second theme is that of the moral limits of markets. One of the most striking tendencies of our time is the expansion of markets and market-orientated reasoning into spheres of life traditionally governed by non-market norms. Consider the outsourcing of war to private contractors; the rise of global markets in organ sales and commercial surrogate pregnancy; the growing use of market incentives to motivate students and teachers; the advent of for-profit prisons. These questions are not only about utility and consent. They are also about the right ways of valuing key social practices – military service, child-bearing, teaching and learning, criminal punishment, and so on. Since marketising social practices many corrupt or degrade the norms that define them, we need to ask what non-market norms we want to protect from market intrusion.

This is a question that requires public debate ►

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PART ONE • How do we decide our values?

‘To achieve a just society, we have to reason together about the meaning of the good life’

◀ about competing conceptions of the right way of valuing goods. Markets are useful instruments for organising productive activity. But unless we want to let the market rewrite the norms that govern social institutions, we need public debate about the moral limits of markets.

A third area concerns inequality, solidarity and civic virtue. In many countries, the gap between rich and poor is growing, reaching levels not seen for many decades. And yet the issue does not figure prominently in contemporary politics. This does not reflect any lack of attention to the topic among political philosophers. Some philosophers would tax the rich to help the poor in the name of utility; taking a hundred pounds from a rich person and giving it to a poor person will diminish the rich person’s happiness only slightly, they speculate, but greatly increase the happiness of the poor person. The philosopher John Rawls also defends redistribution, but on the grounds of hypothetical consent. He argues that if we imagined a hypothetical social contract in an original position of equality, everyone would agree to a principle that would support some form of redistribution. However, these ways of framing the question overlook the argument against inequality most likely to receive a political hearing and most central to the project of moral and civic renewal.

For there is a third, more important reason to worry about the growing inequality in society: too great a gap between rich and poor undermines the solidarity that democratic citizenship requires. Here’s how. As inequality deepens, rich and poor live increasingly separate lives. The affluent send their children to successful schools, leaving other schools to the children of families who have no alternative. A similar trend leads to the secession by the privileged from other public facilities. Private health clubs replace municipal recreation centres and swimming pools. A second or third car removes the need to rely on public transport. And so on. The affluent secede from public places and services, leaving them to those who can’t afford anything else.

This has two bad effects, one fiscal, the other civic. First, public services deteriorate, as those who no longer use those services become less willing to support them with their taxes. Second, communal spaces like parks and buses cease to be places where citizens from different walks of life encounter one another. Institutions that once gathered people together and served as informal schools of virtue become few and far between. The hollowing out of the public realm

makes it difficult to cultivate the solidarity and sense of community on which democratic citizenship depends. So, inequality can be corrosive to civic virtue. A politics of the common good would take as one of its primary goals the reconstruction of the infrastructure of civic life.

The fourth and last theme is a politics of moral engagement. Some consider public engagement with questions of the good life to be a civic transgression, a journey beyond the bounds of liberal public reason. Politics and law should not become entangled in moral and religious disputes, we often think, for such entanglement opens the way to coercion and intolerance. This is a legitimate worry. Citizens of pluralist societies do disagree about morality and religion. Even if, as I’ve argued, it’s not possible for government to be neutral on these disagreements, is it nonetheless possible to conduct our politics on the basis of mutual respect?

The answer, I think, is yes. But we need a more robust and engaged civic life than the one to which we’ve become accustomed. In recent decades, we’ve come to assume that respecting our fellow citizens’ moral convictions means ignoring them and conducting our public life – insofar as possible – without reference to them. But this stance of avoidance can make for a spurious respect. Often, it means suppressing moral disagreement rather than actually avoiding it. This can provoke backlash and resentment. It can also make for an impoverished public discourse, lurching from one news cycle to the next, preoccupied with the scandalous, the sensational, and the trivial.

A more robust public engagement with our moral disagreements could provide a stronger, not weaker, basis for mutual respect. Rather than avoid the convictions that our fellow citizens bring to public life, we should attend to them more directly – sometimes by challenging and contesting them, sometimes by listening to and learning from them. There is no guarantee that public deliberation about hard moral questions will lead in any given situation to agreement – or even to appreciation for the moral and religious views of others. It’s always possible that learning more will lead us to like them less. But we cannot know until we try.

A politics of moral engagement is not only a more inspiring ideal than a politics of avoidance. It is also a more promising basis for a just society.

Michael J Sandel is the Anne T and Robert M Bass Professor of Government at Harvard University. His books include Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do? (Penguin, UK), from which this essay is adapted

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PART ONE • How do we decide our values?

HOW TO LIVE AS IF WE WERE HUMAN

KEY NOTES ROWAN WILLIAMS

In a world that has laid bare the pitfalls of individualism, we must learn once more to live in the real world, says the Archbishop of Canterbury

Human beings all begin their lives in a state of dependence. They need to learn how to speak, how to trust, how to negotiate a world that isn't always friendly and that involves unavoidable limitations on what we might fancy we can have or achieve. They need an environment in which the background is secure enough for them to take the necessary risks of learning – where they know that there are some relationships that don't depend on getting things right, but are just unconditional.

We are not only dependent creatures, we are also beings who take in more than we can easily process from the world around; we know more than we realise, and that helps us to become self-questioning persons, who are always aware that things could be different. We learn this as children through fantasy and play, we keep it alive as adults through all sorts of 'unproductive' activity, from sport to poetry to cookery or dancing or mathematical physics. It is the extra things that make us human; simply meeting what we think are our material needs, making a living, is not uniquely human, just a more complicated version of ants in the anthill.

And this is actually very closely connected with understanding and sympathy for others. If you live in a world where everything encourages you to struggle for your own individual interest and success, you are being encouraged to ignore the reality of other points of view – ultimately, to ignore the cost or the pain of others. The result may be a world where people are very articulate about their own feelings and pretty illiterate about those of others – a world of which 'reality television' gives us some alarming glimpses. An economic climate based on nothing but calculations of self-interest, fed by an amazingly distorted version of Darwinism, doesn't build a habitat for human beings; at best it builds a sort of fortified box room for paranoiacs.

What is rather encouraging is how few people, faced with this, seem actually to want a society composed of people like this. My sense is that, in practice, we have a genuine desire for friendship. We have,

to some extent anyway, looked into the abyss where individualism is concerned and we know that it won't do. This is a moment when every possible agency in civil society needs to reinforce its commitment to a world where thoughtful empathy is a normal aspect of the mature man or woman. And of course without that, there will be no imaginative life, no thinking what might be different.

For myself, the roots of this view are, of course, deep in religious vision and commitment. From this point of view, the importance of the family isn't a sentimental idealising of domestic life or a myth about patriarchy; it is about understanding that you grow in emotional intelligence and maturity because of the presence of a reality that is unconditionally faithful or dependable. In religious terms the unconditionality of family love is a faint mirror of the unconditional commitment of God to be there for us. Similarly, the importance of imaginative life is not a vague belief that we should all have our creative side encouraged but comes out of the notion that the world we live in is rooted in an infinite life, whose dimensions we shall never get hold of – so that all the reality we encounter is more than it seems. As for the essential character of human mutuality, this connects for me specifically with the Christian belief that we are all dependent on one another's gifts, to the extent that if someone else is damaged or frustrated, offended or oppressed, everyone suffers, everyone's humanity is diminished.

I am not suggesting that without Christian belief you can't have these sort of commitments. My point is that, now more than ever, we need to be able in the political and economic context to spell out with a fair degree of clarity what our commitments are and why, what kind of human character we want to see. Politics left to managers and economics left to brokers add up to a recipe for social and environmental chaos. We are all a bit shy, understandably so, of making too much of moral commitment in public discourse; we are wary of high-sounding hypocrisy and conscious of the unavoidable plurality of convictions that will exist in a modern society.

Yet the truth is that the economic and social order isn't a self-contained affair, separate from actual human decisions about what is good and desirable. Certain kinds of political and economic decisions have the effect of threatening the possibilities for full humanity in the sense in which I've sketched it. To resist, we need vision; and whether we are individually religious or not, we need all the resources available for strengthening ►

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‘We have looked into the abyss where individualism is concerned and we know it won’t do’

◀ and deepening that vision. To put it another way, it necessitates the cultivation of virtue, a word that is hard for many to take seriously. But it’s high time we reclaimed it. We have no other way of talking about the solid qualities of human behaviour that make us more than reactive and self-protective – the qualities of courage, intelligent and generous foresight, self-critical awareness and concern for balanced universal welfare which, under other names, have been part of the vocabulary of European ethics for two and half thousand years: fortitude, prudence, temperance and justice. In the Christian world, of course, they have been supplemented by, and grounded in, the virtues of faith, hope and love. Without courage and careful good sense, the capacity to put your own desires into perspective and the concern that all should share in what is recognised as good and lifegiving, there is no stable world, no home to live in – no house to keep – remembering that the word ‘economy’ originally means simply ‘housekeeping’.

It’s of course a word related to ‘ecology’, the study of the ‘house’ we all live in, the material world. And put like that, you can see how similar questions arise in this context, about how we might live as humans in a way that honours rather than endangers the life of our planet. Or, to put it slightly differently, ‘How do we live in a way that shows an understanding that we genuinely live in a shared world, not one that simply belongs to us?’ We should be asking the question whether or not it happens to be urgent, just because it is a question about how we live humanly, how we live in such a way as to show that we understand and respect that we are only one species within creation. If we are locked into a way of life that does not honour who and what we are because it does not honour life itself and our calling to nourish it, we are not even going to know where to start in addressing the environmental challenge. We must begin by recognising that our ecological crisis is part of a crisis of what we understand by our humanity; it is part of a general process of losing our ‘feel’ for what is appropriately human, a loss that has been going on for some centuries and which some cultures and economies have been energetically exporting to the whole world.

Once again it’s about recovering what ‘virtue’ could mean. It all points to the central and essential importance of cultivating trustworthiness, realism or humility and the clear sense that we must resist policies or practices which accept the welfare of some at the expense of others and of the planet. That’s a back-of-an-

envelope idea of where we might start in pressing for a global economic order that has some claim to be just. It can’t be too often stressed that we are not talking about simply limiting damage to vulnerable societies far away: the central issues exposed by the crises in environment and economy alike are everyone’s business, and the risks of what some commentators have called a ‘barbarising’ of Western societies as a result of panic and social insecurity are real enough. Equally it can’t be too often stressed that it is only the generosity of an ethical approach to these matters that can begin to relate material wealth to human wellbeing, the happiness that is spiritual and relational and based on the recognition of non-negotiable human worth.

Can we, then, turn our backs on the worlds of unreality so seductively opened up by some of our recent financial history? Patience, trust and the acceptance of a world of real limitation are all hard work; yet the only liberation that is truly worthwhile is the liberation to be where we are and who we are as human beings, to be anchored in the reality that is properly ours. Other less serious and less risky enterprises may appear to promise a power that exceeds our limitations – but it is at the expense of truth, and so, ultimately at the expense of human life itself. Perhaps the very heart of the current challenge is the invitation to discover a little more deeply what is involved in human freedom – not the illusory freedom of some fantasy of control; to discover how to inhabit our world, not to colonise, control or subdue it.

Rowan Williams is the Archbishop of Canterbury. This article draws on a number of the Archbishop’s recent public interventions

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ETHICS WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM FRIENDS

KEY NOTES MARK VERNON

Self-interest and calculation have derailed our values. To get back on track we must remember the affective bonds that link us to one another

The nation's morals are like its teeth: the more decayed they are, the more it hurts to touch them.' So noted George Bernard Shaw in an observation that still rings true: if the word 'moral' feels painful, the word 'virtue' makes most people wince. That's striking because virtues are merely the skills that enable us to flourish, if we have them. Courage and kindness, good judgement and justice: they promise life lived well. So whence the rot?

The root problem, I suspect, is that our current moral discourse lacks a compelling vision of what it is to be human. Ethics has ceased to be a source of inspiration, and instead feels like a burden – a limitation. This is because it's become what has been said of economics: a dismal science.

On the one hand is the ethics of calculation, the weighing up of one person's interests against another. It's ethics as a cost-benefit analysis, a process that hands it over to accountants. This utilitarianism is an honourable tradition: the original utilitarians argued that something is right because it increases human happiness. The problem is that they had a thin sense of what human happiness entails – certain material needs and a decent dose of quality pleasures. That struggles to articulate any richer vision of what humans might be; it fails to make any profound call on our nature. Today, pleasures abound, at least in the west, and it's an approach running out of steam. We sense there must be more. Utilitarianism can't say what.

Then, on the other hand, is the ethics of regulation. This is ethics as a series of responsibilities to which we're tied as a result of a contract we're locked into because we live with others. It risks handing ethics over to the lawyers, and has a view of life that is bureaucratic. It makes personal ethics feel like corporate compliance, a burden – perhaps a necessary one – but never a source of vitality because, again, it does not have the capacity to inspire. It doesn't ask what we can be, only addressing what we ought to do, and often ought not to do.

So where might a new ethics be found? Well, a

start can be made by attending more closely to what we have. For they're not just dry. They're marked by deep ambivalences, which are, in fact, clues.

Take human rights. Rights have won many people many freedoms, and the rhetoric of rights is very powerful. But implicit in rights are less appealing values too, particularly when they become all-pervasive. When everyone is claiming this or that by right, one person is pitted against another in a conflict of rights. Similarly, that creates a culture of grievance in which people see the moral task as being, in essence, the securing of more rights against others who would otherwise take them away. But here's a paradox: an individual's rights only make a difference to him or her if given by others. Robinson Crusoe had no rights on his desert island because, as Simone Weil put it, 'A right which goes unrecognised by anybody is not worth very much.' A first thought.

A second, related clue comes from the values inherent in democracy. An obvious, invaluable strength of a democratic culture is that it allows everyone to pursue their interests relatively freely. Yet, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, the democratic individual can easily fall into the delusion that they are sufficiently rich and educated to supply their own needs. 'Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anyone,' he writes in *Democracy in America*. 'They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.'

He'd spotted an old problem. Pericles, the great champion of democracy in ancient Athens, praised individual initiative, but also warned against the citizen who lives only for himself. He said that such individuals have no right to be part of the city-state upon which their flourishing depends. He had a noun for such folk too, *idiotes* – from which we get a well-known English word.

In other words, the tensions inherent in the language of rights and democracy highlight something of great importance. To be human is to be, at once, independent and dependent. We can only become independent because of our dependency, and vice versa.

Think about friendship. Aristotle had a great definition of friendship: a friend is 'another self,' he said. The definition is so good because it functions at multiple levels. First, a friend is literally 'an other self', another person. Unlike erotic love, in which there is a powerful desire to meld with the other, to become

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‘Our current moral discourse lacks a compelling vision of what it is to be human’

◀ wholly dependent upon another, the love called friendship wants the friend to be him or herself. That’s one reason why friends like to talk, and don’t on the whole kiss; and why they don’t mind being apart for a while, something lovers hate.

Second, a friend is another self in the sense that you see yourself in your friend, and they in you. That mirroring reveals similarities. It also reveals differences, which can be painful. But any profound connection between you and a good friend is forged out of both – you both compliment and complement each other. That’s something of the reciprocity of dependence and independence again.

Then there’s the third meaning of another self, when a friend becomes integral to your own sense of self. Friends are then like two eyes that together do one thing: both see the world in the same way. Or they bask in each other’s reflected glory, and feel each other’s agony. We have a word for such friends: soulmates – one soul in two bodies.

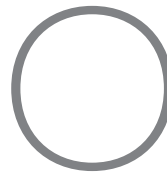
In short, friendship tells us that we are not billiard balls that collide and rebound. Neither are we like drops in the ocean, which lose their identity as they dissolve. Rather, we are a fine suspension of one another, in each other. We are dependent and independent. The good life, witnessed to by friendship, arises from both principles.

If that’s right, then our ethics is broken for two reasons. First, one principle has come to dominate over another. Thus, the ethics of the free market instructs us to live wholly self-interested lives – though, it’s worth noting that to respond to that excess with an opposite, self-abnegating injunction is equally misguided. Rather we naturally befriend ourselves, argued Aristotle, because we are closest to ourselves; but we should do so in order to get over ourselves, to forget ourselves. Therein lies my freedom: liberation from self-obsession to be with and for others.

Second, at the social level, there is a similar move outwards. A broken ethics instructs us to live with each other as if we were foreigners; democracy as a company of strangers. That is no mean achievement in a plural world. However, it’s a view of politics that struggles to believe in social justice because that involves recognising that my own good is implicitly caught up with the lives of others. If I only desire to live with others insofar as it’s good for me, the ethics of calculation and rule is the result.

To put it another way, note how our understanding of justice, today, is dominated by legalistic themes,

mostly of rights or just deserts. Whereas for Aristotle, while similar elements are important, justice is more fundamentally derivative of something else: civic friendship, or reciprocal goodwill between citizens.



Of course, Aristotle himself failed to live up to this ideal in his exclusion of slaves and women from the citizenry. But the principle is clear: friendship is not a value add, it is the basic social value. It’s what makes politics

possible. Conducting politics as if it were about the management of a collective of strangers is, according to this reading, unsustainable.

A better politics is only possible when the community manifests sympathy. Citizens can then be bound by bonds of concern, not just obligation. They won’t become friends in the personal sense, and the courts will still have work to do. But goodwill will tend to prevail. Such a society will also know social habits like respect, and it’ll enjoy collective celebrations, when ‘we’ win the cup.

This integrative view finds support in other areas of research. A striking one is neuroscience. Iain McGilchrist, in *The Master and his Emissary*, explores how the two hemispheres of the brain see the world differently, one as if we are independent, self-attending creatures; the other as if we are dependent, other-seeking creatures. His point is not that one is better than the other, but that both are required, one for the other – though, he warns, the independent, self-attending hemisphere has triumphed over the other in the modern world.

Ethics is a form of practical intelligence. Like friendship, we nurture virtues best by our engagement with others and the world. Such skills must be learnt afresh in every generation – another reason why a fixed, codified system never inspires: it contains little conception that life is to be lived. But that also means there’s hope, because ethics can be remade. That will come about by recognising the nature of our dependency and independence. We’ll sense it’s right because it’ll speak to our humanity, thereby enlarging it. Who would want to live without friends? Who could? It’ll be good because it offers us the resources to flourish.

*Mark Vernon is a journalist and author. His books include *The Philosophy of Friendship* (Palgrave Macmillan) and *Wellbeing* (Acumen), part of the *Art of Living* series he edits. www.markvernon.com*

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TALKING POINTS

Questions of freedom

Outside of religion, goodness has become a spiky concept. But that does not mean there is no place for cautionary rules, says **Alain de Botton**

From an atheist's perspective, goodness has become an awkward and dispiriting concept. Around the 'good person', there hover a host of paradoxically negative associations: of piety, solemnity, bloodlessness and sexual renunciation, as if goodness were something one would try only when other more difficult but more fulfilling avenues had been exhausted. One thinks of melancholy moments of childhood, when one had to follow arbitrary school rules, write thank you letters for unwanted gifts and do community service.

Being good has come to feel dishonest. The great psychologists of the modern age, from La Bruyère to Freud, have convincingly shown that there are no intrinsically benevolent patterns of behaviour. Egoism and aggression are understood to lie at the heart of our personalities and never more so than in individuals who attempt to cover them up with unusual displays of virtue. The nun, the parish priest, the self-sacrificing politician; we have been trained to sense fouler impulses behind their gentle deeds. What looks like goodness must involve either obedience or perverted forms of egoism (the biographers can be expected to unearth the details in due course). Self-interested motives are glued to the underside of every apparently benevolent act. Probe hard enough at kindness, concern or pity and the clear-headed psychologist will soon come up against the fundamental bedrocks of character: envy, malice and fear. To be optimistic about the human condition is to appear sentimental, credulous and not a little simple-minded.

There is another reason to be suspicious of goodness, centring around insoluble doubts as to what the concept actually involves. After centuries of dogmatic certainty, we live in an era of militant doubt about ethical claims. None seem able to stand up to the quasi-scientific standards of proof that we demand of them – so that suggestions have been downgraded from the status of objective truths to that of simple prejudices. The sensitive, open-minded sections of society recognise all judgments to be culturally and contextually specific and therefore incapable of elevation to the rank of general truths. A terror of old-fashioned moralism has driven all talk of morality out of the public sphere. Who would now dare to suggest how our neighbours should be judged in the vast domain we term private life? In flight from dogmatism,

we stand transfixed by the dangers of moral convictions. A democratic spirit has served to generate scepticism about authority and hierarchy in every sphere. Judgements about values tremble before the incensed question of who one person could ever be to tell another how to live. Those who profess to have answers are ridiculed in a tone adopted by furious adolescents when probing at the assumptions of their parents. In the political arena, there is no faster way to insult opponents than to accuse them of trying to undertake the impossible task of improving the ethical basis of society. They can reliably be charged with believing in that most odious concept of modern secular politics, a nanny state.

We are familiar with our desires to become happy, successful and wealthy; it would sound peculiar and repellently high-minded to confess to any comparable ambition to become *good*.

There is a well-known argument, for which twentieth century history holds no shortage of evidence, which proposes that once God dies, anything becomes possible. The thesis centres around issues of knowledge on the one hand and motivation on the other. It doubts how we can possibly know what is right and wrong without God to inform us. And it asks how – even if we arrive at principles – we can ever be motivated to honour them without the forceful external encouragement of heaven and hell.

Superficial logic

Such reservations may have a superficial logic to them, but they are more vulnerable than they at first appear. To say that without God, we must surrender attachments to good and evil reveals a debt to the very religious mindset which the argument purports to question, for only if we had truly once believed that God existed – and that the foundations for morality were hence in their essence supernatural – would the recognition of God's non-existence force us to surrender moral principles.

Yet if we assume from the outset that it was humans who made God up, then the line rapidly collapses into a tautology, for why should anything have become possible simply because humans came to recognise that they were the authors of the very rules they had once placed into the mouths of supernatural beings?

For the religious, moral codes exist because God offered them to us – and because they are true. For the secularist however, the origins of ethics are best accounted for in the most prosaic, cautionary and pragmatic terms which, while lacking any grandeur, at least have the habit of sounding convincing to hardened cynics. The codes exist because we made them up – and we did so as an answer to one of the most hazardous problems of social existence: man's aggression against man. Religious morals were created as attempts to control our tendencies towards violence, vindictiveness, spite, rivalry, prejudice and

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◀ infidelity – which would destroy society if left unchecked.

The answer to Machiavellians who relish in describing our insatiable selfishness is hence equivocal. We are of course motivated by our own advantage, but this necessarily includes that of the community at large. Whatever individualists might propose, effective capitalism does not last long without a strong ethical backbone. Self-interest therefore pushes us to appreciate the benefits of acting kindly, along with the exquisite sensations that come from reducing the suffering of others, besides which more straightforwardly selfish pleasures pale into insignificance (it has always been an especially perverse philosophical legacy to suggest that behaviour can only be considered good if it delivers no satisfaction whatsoever to the agent who performs it – a line which at its most absurd sees no difference in moral value between the actions of a criminal and of an aid worker, because both have been ‘motivated’ to act as they see fit).

The Judeo-Christian moral code was designed to foster what we would now call ‘good relationships’. We may not consciously want to become good, but we tend to perceive well enough why we would want to improve our talent at creating harmonious connections with children, parents, lovers, colleagues and fellow citizens – and by adulthood are usually accorded a persuasive taste of the bitter consequences of failure.

Our religious codes are our cautionary rules, projected into the sky and reflected back to earth in disembodied and majestic forms. Forceful injunctions to be sympathetic, patient and just reflect our knowledge of what will draw our societies back from fragmentation and self-destruction. So vital are these injunctions that we did not for a long time dare to admit that we had even formulated them, lest this would allow them to be questioned and handled irreverently. We had to pretend that morality came from elsewhere to insulate it from our prevarications and our frailties.

Questioning power

Defenders of liberal neutrality and critics of the nanny state are apt to respond to the prospect of such a society with horror, pointing out how severely it would diminish that most cardinal of political goods, freedom. For centuries, the word rightly generated immediate reverence. When monarchical governments demanded complete obedience to their corrupt authority and when individuals were harangued by repressive, misguided traditional religious forces, there could have been no more essential priority for political theorists than to question power, to deem authority inherently dangerous and to challenge attempts to dictate ethics.

But one wonders whether the idea of freedom still always deserves the deference we are prepared to grant it; whether the word might not in truth be a historical anomaly which we should learn

to nuance and adapt to our own circumstances. We might ask whether for developed societies, a lack of freedom remains the principal problem of communal life. In the chaos of the liberal free market, we tend to lack not so much freedom, as the chance to use it well. We lack guidance, self-understanding, self-control, direction. Being left alone to ruin our lives as we please is not a liberty worth revering. Libertarians imply that external suggestions of how to behave must always strike us as unwelcome curtailments of our well-formulated plans. The external voice is – in this account – an inherently intrusive, undesirable one, impeding on the deliberations of rational, mature free agents.

The benefit of witnesses

However, unlike those unfeasibly self-contained, sane and reasonable grown-ups that we are assumed to be by liberal politicians, most of us are still disturbed children. We may in many situations long to be encouraged to behave as we would hope to. We may want outsiders who can help us to stay close to the commitments we revere but lose sight of. We may benefit from having witnesses, like house guests, who can shame us away from indulging our anger, narcissism, sadism, envy, laziness or despair.

Freedom worthy of its illustrious associations should not mean being left alone to destroy ourselves. It should be compatible with being admonished, guided and even on rare occasions restricted – and so helped to become who we hope to be.

Alain de Botton is a bestselling author and social entrepreneur. The School of Life, which he helps to run, will host a Sunday Sermon on ethics, given by Baroness Mary Warnock, on 28 March 2010 www.theschooloflife.com

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TALKING POINTS

A plural future

Often on the fringes of critical debate, Islam has much to offer when it comes to the development of an ethics based on our common citizenship, says **Tariq Ramadan**

Let us agree on this: we live in pluralistic societies and pluralism is an unavoidable fact. We are equal citizens, but with different cultural and religious backgrounds. So, how can we, instead of being obsessed with potential 'conflicts of identity' within communities, change that viewpoint to define and promote a common ethical framework, nurtured by the richness of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds? After all, a pluralistic society needs a strong and effective ethics of citizenship in order to face up to both its internal challenges (diversity, equal rights, racism, corruption, etc) and international challenges (economic crisis, global warming, migrations, etc).

Here's one principle for reaching that goal: an ethics of citizenship should itself reflect the diversity of the citizenship. For whilst we agree that no one has the right to impose their beliefs on another, we also understand that our common life should be defined in such a way that it includes the contributions of all the religious and philosophical traditions within it. Further, the way to bring about such inclusion is through critical debate.

When it comes to the new Muslim presence in Western countries, that critical debate is hard to achieve. Islam is perceived as a 'problem', never as a gift in our quest for a rich and stimulating diversity. And that's a mistake. Islam has much to offer – not least when considering how individuals in politics and business have recently been behaving, within the limits of the law, but with a clear lack of ethics.

Islamic literature is full of injunctions about the centrality of an education based on ethics and proper ends. Individual responsibility, when it comes to communicating, learning, and teaching, is central to the Islamic message. Muslims are expected to be 'witnesses to their message before people', which means speaking in a decent way, preventing cheating and corruption, and respecting the environment. Integrity in politics, and the rejection of usurious speculation in economics, are principles that are pushing Muslim citizens and scholars to explore new avenues that bring public life and interpersonal ethics together.

A new common narrative

More broadly, the Muslim presence should be perceived as positive too. It is not undermining the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian ethical and cultural roots of Europe. Neither is it

Q&A

DR MIRIAM STOPPARD
AUTHOR

How important are ethical concerns to your daily life?

I've not really ever sat down to think about all this until now, but now I realise that ethical considerations colour every part of every day of my life. Because what I can see is that I have been very strongly guided by a moral and ethical viewpoint, and that viewpoint is that women – and their children – have the right to be listened to and to be involved in their medical treatment, and to have their views and their standpoint taken seriously. When I first went into medicine, that's not how it was. I remember asking a surgeon at a mastectomy whether the woman being operated on knew she'd wake up without a breast. He muttered something about having mentioned it as a possibility ... and I found myself thinking, this is horrific. Women have rights, they have feelings. So much of medicine at the time was about things being done TO women BY men. I had a very strong sense of injustice.

What childhood influences shaped your beliefs?

I had, from my earliest times, a very strong sense that women could do everything men could do, and that they should. I grew up on Tyneside, and I remember always being struck by Grace Darling, who had rowed her father's boat to rescue some sailors who'd been shipwrecked. It was a huge boat, and she rowed it just as well and just as bravely as any man could.

I grew up in an orthodox Jewish home, and it was quite disciplined and there was a strong sense of charity, and of justice. I grew up being very sensitive to prejudice, and very sensitive to people making sloppy judgments – my ethical

background was that you were diligent, and that you did your research and that you cared about what you were doing. There was also a strong work ethic – I remember my mother finding me one morning asleep on my bed in my party dress, having been out the night before. I was about sixteen and doing work experience, and I thought I'd give it a miss because of being out so late – but she was having none of it. She peeled off my party dress, made me put on my work clothes, and pushed me out of the front door.

What else shaped your beliefs?

When I got older I was shocked by how little information ordinary people were given as medical patients, and by how much power doctors held. I decided to challenge that, and the way to challenge it seemed to be to write, and later on to take part in television programmes – that was a way of passing on information, of sharing knowledge. I care about people having good information – right now a lot of what's presented as important medical research isn't that at all, and I feel strongly about making that clear. As a journalist, I make ethical decisions every day about how to respond to medical issues in the news on behalf of my newspaper.

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◀ introducing dogmatism into the debate, as if spiritual and religious traditions automatically draw on authoritarian sources. They can operate within both the limits of the law and in the open public sphere too. On the contrary, the Muslim presence can play a critical role in thinking about our future and shaping a new common narrative. It can help recall and revive some of the fundamental principles upon which the cultures of Europe are based.

To put it another way, Muslims remind their fellow citizens that one cannot simply get rid of older ethical traditions and replace them by a supposedly neutral rule of law or by impartial values formed in a free market. To agree on the rule of law, equality and democratic transparency is surely not enough. Contemporary crises within societies, and at the international level, remind us we need more ethics in our public life, not merely more efficiency.

Whether we can agree on the content of a common ethic is another question entirely. But this is where critical and in-depth debates should take place, and it's in this way that the issue of our plural future together should be determined. That future cannot be shaped by superficial discussions of national identity, values or Britishness. Similarly, we must stop treating diversity as a hindrance, for it should be exactly the opposite. Rather, an ethics based on our common citizenship must be forged from a serious and profound engagement with the meaning of our common humanity.

Tariq Ramadan is Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at Oxford University. His books include What I Believe (OUP) and Radical Reform, Islamic Ethics and Liberation (OUP). www.tariqramadan.com

TALKING POINTS

Politics and humanism

Humanists apply their own standards of evaluation to politics, yet the impartial society to which they aspire ought to be a goal shared by all, says **Andrew Copson**

Not believing in any post-mortem existence where all wrongs will be righted, humanists think of politics as incredibly important. It is more than just a necessity arising from the fact that we're social animals: it is an opportunity to promote the opportunity of a good life for all.

Utopia is never attainable and a rational approach to our common life must accept that, but a progressive amelioration of the condition of all people is essential no less. So, we can judge our politicians, and ourselves as participating citizens, by how far we are moving towards ▶

Q&A

JUDE KELLY
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, SOUTHBANK CENTRE

How much do you think about ethics on a daily basis?

I'm conscious of ethics all the time, every day. Ethical considerations are the reason I do the arts in the way I do the arts, and my ethical beliefs underpin everything I do. Because what I believe, wholeheartedly, is that we still live in an unequal society, and that art is a fundamental right of a human being. And I'm always conscious of the fact that the original decision to use taxation to help arts to flourish was designed to help arts flourish for as many people as possible, and not just for the few. So that is, and always has been, my guiding principle.

What about the ethics of others in leadership roles?

One thing that surprises you when you're in public life is that not everyone has the same ethical framework. It leaves you aghast sometimes. You're trying to be scrupulous, or at least to take an inventory the whole time, and then you meet people who have a callous disregard for ethics. That's very unsettling, because unless there's a big collective agreement among people in leadership positions on ethics, you're left with a fabric that's full of holes.

What was your ethical framework when you were growing up?

I grew up in Liverpool, in a home that wasn't religious and wasn't wealthy, but one in which equality and respect for everyone were fundamental. And it wasn't just taught, it was seeing around me that in Liverpool we had a community made up of so many people from different parts of the world who lived together happily and peacefully. Seeing that led me to believe that,

though people might believe they'll be happier if they stick to people who are like them, in fact our potential for genuine happiness is greatest if we share and give across cultural and other boundaries.

Has the wider ethical framework in Britain changed over the years?

Both my parents had lived through World War Two, and my father had fought in it, and I think underpinning our ethical framework and underpinning a lot of people's ethical frameworks at that time was the war. There was this sense that together people had come through a difficult time, and together they were working for a country that would have a better health and welfare system. There was a real sense of something more important than individuals – after all, that was what the war had been about – and it did permeate everything at that time. Having said that, I don't buy into this idea that young people today don't care about important things. The ones I meet are fiercely idealistic – they definitely want the world to be a better place, and they're prepared to work towards that goal.

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◀ an open society that prizes equality, justice and freedom. Do their actions and reasons demonstrate such commitments? Is the content of their arguments informed by ‘reason and humanitarianism’, as Karl Popper put it? Are they working to oppose those forces which would diminish the chances of a good life for all?

These ethical tests are very different from those that would judge politicians according to whether they have claimed expenses for a duck island or a flagpole, and the ephemeral expenses scandal at Westminster should not obscure higher ethical standards. Similarly, public anger at an economic crisis caused by a profession granted too much freedom, so that it acted selfishly, should not make us turn away from freedom in general. The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre said, ‘When we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.’ The defence of human responsibility against the negative effects on those whom irresponsibility harms is an important part of any humanist ethic.

A secular model of state

Secularism is also vital. The only viable common framework of civic values in a society that is diverse in terms of thoughts and opinions is one entailing tolerance of all views and lifestyles, where no one is privileged or discriminated against solely because of their religious or non-religious worldview. This is not a framework that imposes specifically non-religious, atheist or humanist values and behaviours on everybody, but is one that maintains a disinterested impartiality between people of different religious or non-religious beliefs, so long as they are not harming others, or others’ rights and freedoms.

So, religious practices such as the wearing of religious dress in public shouldn’t engage the state’s interests, whereas the state can intervene over the wearing of a burqa by a nursery school teacher, on the grounds of the damage it does to children’s education. Likewise, individual ethical choices such as the decision to be assisted in ending one’s own life when unable to do it for oneself, should not be regulated on the basis of the unshared metaphysical beliefs of certain groupings in society, be they a majority or minority. Rather, the issues should be decided on the grounds of individual freedom and dignity.

In many ways, we in Britain have far from a genuinely secular state, still maintaining the medieval rubble of an established church with concomitant legal discrimination that significantly disadvantages non-Christians – for example in the employment and admissions policies of state-funded religious schools. And the unjustified privilege still held by the Church of England in our diverse society is clearly demonstrated by the presence in our parliament of 26 men from a religion whose active adherents are a minority in the population. A good ethical test for the ▶

Q&A

SHAMI CHAKRABARTI
DIRECTOR OF LIBERTY

How important are ethics in your job?

My work is all about campaigning for an ethical framework for human rights. People sometimes think human rights is just about lawyers or governments but it isn’t, it’s about every one of us as well. So I think it’s incredibly important that as a manager, as a colleague, as a mother, as a friend, just as a human being, that I live up to principles of integrity and to high ethical standards every day, in my dealings with everyone I have to deal with.

Isn’t that a terrible pressure?

I think of it more as a guide than as a pressure. We’ve all got lots of decisions to make in our lives, and having a very clear framework for personal ethics makes things easier for me, not more difficult.

What’s the fundamental code we all should live by?

The simple code for living is equal treatment. There are all sorts of rights and freedoms we have and hold dear – freedom of speech, privacy, conscience and so on. And they can’t necessarily be absolute, but what we can say is that any changes to them have to be universal. So for example, take the issue of body scanners at airports. You can argue that it’s an invasion of privacy to have them, you can argue that it’s necessary to prevent terrorism, but what you can’t argue is that it’s ok to compromise someone’s privacy and not others.

So it’s not going to be ok to isolate certain sorts of passengers, who look different maybe, and only use body scanners on them. It’s about equal treatment: if you make compromises on liberties, you make them for everyone, not

just for some people. That’s paramount.

What kind of ethical framework did you grow up with?

My parents absolutely weren’t part of the liberal bourgeois elite – my dad was a bookkeeper, and my mum was a shop assistant. But they are thoughtful, ethical, political people who believed in discussing and debating things, and we always did that as a family. I remember when I was about 12 saying to my dad that I thought someone who’d done something terrible should get the death penalty, and he said to me: but what if you were convicted wrongly of something terrible, and you were given the death penalty? And that totally encompasses my essential point about human rights: you’ve got to think about how it would feel if you were the person affected by the framework you’re putting into place.

How did you react to the MPs’ expenses story, and to the banking crash?

With both these stories, people could argue that something was within the rules, so it was ok to do it. But there has to be a proper ethical framework. Even with it, things can still break down or go wrong – but without it the breakdown will be greater, and more serious.

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◀ conduct of politicians for humanists would be how far they pursue a secular model of the state when questions of constitutional reform arise.

But a secular state is not just a goal for humanists. It can be an aspiration for religious people who accept that they must live cooperatively with others who do not share their beliefs. Indeed, the secular state embodies an expectation that individual freedom leads inevitably to diversity. It recognises that the diverse ways of living that flourish in consequence are a product of the open society's values.

The standard by which we judge our politicians – at least in part – must be to what extent they bring us closer to that ideal way of living.

Andrew Copson is Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association

TALKING POINTS

Delusions of dualism

Contemporary ethics are in thrall to an outmoded world view, one that sees us as detached from the natural world, not as part of it. **Mary Midgley** wonders why

We are so used to conceiving of ourselves as at the centre of the natural world. Even if we don't want to think that way, we were largely brought up to see the human race as a man in charge of a machine – maybe driving a combine harvester? – someone for whom the crop that he reaps, and the landscape round it, are simply sets of further mechanisms, extensions of his machine, all supplied to meet his needs. This explains why Copenhagen has been such a catastrophe. It leads either to denial, and the difficulty of accepting the facts about climate change, or to a desire to postpone the implications, 'Lord, make me green but not yet.'

The vision is rooted in an outdated, seventeenth-century mechanism and dualism – a notion of ourselves as detached, spiritual beings, securely based outside an inert, passive material world, owning it and free to shape it for our own purposes. This attitude still strikes us as scientific because, when it first arose, it fitted well with the science of the time. What is surprising is how strongly it persists, even though science now tells us a quite different story. In theory, most of us now believe that humanity is not just an alien spiritual tribe colonising the material world but a genuine part of it, naturally evolved here, one voice among others in the great chorus of earthly life.

Yet, to an extraordinary extent, the dualists' contemptuous, distancing way of imagining nature still holds sway. Scientists are professionally expected to be 'objective' – not just impartial,

but treating the things they study as alien objects, not as beings akin to themselves which might deserve respect and consideration. The notion that humans ought to have humane attitudes to the rest of creation gets shouldered aside. Dualism survives, as such images do, in a bizarre, one-legged form as a naive kind of materialism – a belief in lifeless, valueless physical matter without the corresponding notion of spirit that once balanced it. It is an unworkable belief in a world of objects without subjects.

This, we should remember, is just one possible ethic among others, not something forced on us by evidence. We do not have to think this way. When James Lovelock introduced the notion of Gaia – of a living earth, acting as a whole to preserve itself, within which we are just one small element – he cut straight across this old, uncriticized way of thinking and threw the scientific establishment into conniptions. Outside that establishment, many of us found the notion, and also the imagery of the mother-goddess, quite plausible and convincing. It supplied a long-needed context, a background that explained human activity as part of a larger whole, and it did indeed have some effect on our actions. After a time, too, the theory itself has been established as scientifically correct. Scientists, however, still carefully avoid using the name Gaia, thus escaping the imagery that might call for a change of attitude. And even for the rest of us, that imagery is too new and too isolated to have anything like the force of the habitual, flattering human-centred vision that had grown up for so long in our civilization.

That vision flowed partly from Christianity but also of late, yet more strongly, from the Enlightenment. Moral attitudes in the west have centred for so long on respect for individuality that we have somewhat lost the wider reverence for an enclosing whole which is necessary and natural to so many cultures. Our sages, too, have often discouraged the sense of childlike helplessness which is conveyed by mythical figures such as Gaia. They urge us to ditch parent-figures and act always as independent adults.

The sense of independence that they call for is, of course, itself yet another myth. It can help us when we need to correct over-dependence within human life. But if it makes us forget for a moment how totally dependent each of us actually is, both on those around us and on the natural world, it is merely selling us delusion. The ideal of independence then becomes distorted in the same way that the ideal of fighting against evil became distorted by the notion of the Cold War – a black-and-white conflict between two civilizations – and for rather similar reasons. They both flatter our vanity and encourage self-worship. Neither, therefore, is a usable basis for our ethics, and certainly not for environmental ethics.

*Mary Midgley is a moral philosopher and author of many books including *Beast and Man* and *Evolution as Religion*, published as *Routledge Classics*, and *Earthy Realism: The Meaning of Gaia* (Imprint Academic)*

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INTERLUDE

What would the economist John Maynard Keynes make of the state we're in?

We asked philosopher Edward Skidelsky to press Keynes' biographer, his father Robert, on what the great man might say

ROBERT AND EDWARD SKIDELSKY

Dear Robert

Do you remember sending me, when I was at school, that charming essay by Keynes, *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*? I read it again the other day with renewed admiration. Written in 1930, in the depths of the Depression, its sights are fixed on a distant, happy future. In 100 years, predicts Keynes, living standards will have risen four to eight times. The economic problem as we know it will be solved; work will be an amusing pastime; and the Gradgrinds of the world will yield their place to those 'delightful people who are capable of taking direct enjoyment in things, the lilies of the field who toil not, neither do they spin'.

Keynes' words are flamboyantly his own, but the thought behind them is common to many of the great classical economists. John Stuart Mill bemoaned the 'trampling, crushing, elbowing and treading on each other's heels, which form the existing type of social life', and looked forwards to a world in which 'while no one is poor, no one desires to be richer'. Marx pictured the citizens of his utopia hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, and discussing poetry after dinner. The last outburst of such enthusiasm was in the sixties. With all real material wants now satisfied, argued philosopher Herbert Marcuse, our surplus energies should be channelled into play, not work. His hippy followers put it more succinctly: 'Turn on, tune in, drop out.'

Turning from these happy visions to our current situation, it's hard not to feel a sense of anticlimax. Keynes' promise, like that of the evil genie in the fairy tale, has both come true and not come true. We are indeed four times richer than we were in 1930, but the curse of Adam is still very much upon us. After a slight fall in the middle of last century, working hours in Britain and America are on the rise again, especially among professionals. The arts of living have decayed. Leisure has come to signify a mere interruption of the work cycle, an interlude of consumption or dissipation. In some circles, it has merged with work entirely. Parties are an opportunity to 'network', holidays to 'refuel'. Our lives are as purposive as ever, yet without ultimate purpose.

Some say that the recent financial crisis has prompted a fundamental shift in attitudes towards wealth creation. I'm not so sure. What has come under fire in recent months is only the machinery of capitalism, not its *raison d'être*. Growth remains the centrepiece of national policy. After all, it is on account of their power to retard growth that the banks are being brought to heel. Our ends remain the same; debate focuses only on the means.

How strange our situation would have appeared to Keynes or Mill. They assumed that economic growth was a process with a telos, an end, and that having reached this end, it would come a halt. That it might go on for ever would have seemed to them a horrid joke. Our position is akin to that of the pig farmer described by philosopher David Wiggins, whose only object in life was to buy

'In some circles, leisure has merged with work entirely. Parties are an opportunity to network, holidays to refuel. Our lives are as purposive as ever, yet without ultimate purpose'

more land to grow more crops to feed more pigs, to buy more land to grow more crops to feed more pigs ... and so on, *ad infinitum*.

So my question is this: can we today revive Keynes' idea of economic growth as a process with an end? Can we define a state of 'sufficiency', a state in which we might be said to have 'enough'? Or are all such notions hopelessly confused?

Dear Edward

I share your disquiet with the idea of unending growth. But the concept of sufficiency is a hard one to put over to economists today, because it is held to rest upon a 'metaphysical' (and therefore spurious) notion of 'real needs'. Keynes

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INTERLUDE

◀ had no qualms on this score, because he viewed economics as a moral science, a practical application of the ethics he had learnt from G.E. Moore. He knew – by ‘intuition’, he would have said – how much people really needed. But from a modern perspective, he was simply rehashing the snobbish ideals of his Bloomsbury friends. Remember Virginia Woolf’s famous claim that £500 a year and a room of one’s own is all a writer requires. Keynes would have agreed with the sentiment, probably the figure too, if translated into modern money.

However, Keynes also had what he thought were good economic reasons for believing that

‘Top executives talk of the ‘golden cage’. We are like gerbils trapped in an endlessly revolving wheel. If growth serves merely to oil this wheel, what possible justification can it have?’

growth must come to an end. The key lies in the famous law of diminishing marginal utility. Little Harry’s first teddy bear is a pure delight, his second somewhat less so, and his 10th gives him no pleasure at all. This familiar observation can be generalised: any good, taken unit by unit, yields progressively less utility. Like most economists of his day, Keynes applied the law of diminishing marginal utility not just to individual goods but to goods as a whole, concluding that growth as such must eventually fizzle out. There will come a point, as he puts it, when ‘needs are satisfied in the sense that we prefer to devote our further energies to non-economic purposes’. Rigorous argument underlay the prophecy of ‘economic bliss’.

Economists today are no longer convinced by this argument. The law of diminishing marginal utility might make sense if applied to the consumption of existing goods at a single moment in time, but it falls to pieces if one tries to apply it to new or different goods as they are rolled out by the production machine over time. Since there is virtually unlimited opportunity for adding to such products, the urgency of wants for individuals, and for society as a whole, remains undiminished. There is no reason to postulate a final state of satiety. Keynes greatly underestimated technological progress. He also underestimated the power of advertising to create wants, and, of course, the extent to which our economy would be dominated by the advertising industry.

But there is a still more fundamental problem with the idea of an end to growth – one which is hinted at by Keynes himself in a typically fertile aside. Human needs, he notes in *Economic Possibilities*, fall into two classes – ‘those which are

absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows’. Absolute needs may well be satiable, but relative needs are clearly not, for they increase in line with the general level. I want a Jaguar not just because it is an intrinsically fine car but because its possession puts me ahead of my peers. If they all owned Jaguars, I would need a Rolls. The grass is always greener on the other side.

Keynes raises this spectre only to lay it aside. Perhaps he considered relative needs trivial compared to absolute needs. But in the modern west, the bulk of consumer expenditure is on items that are not necessary in any absolute sense, but serve merely to elevate their possessor above others. The need to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ is felt by even the poorest in our society. Top executives talk of ‘the golden cage’. We are like gerbils trapped in an endlessly revolving wheel. If growth merely serves to oil this wheel, what possible justification can it have?

Dear Robert

Your remarks on insatiability put me in mind of Aristotle, whom I was teaching to my students last term. He understood very well the psychology of avarice, of enslavement to endless, pointless accumulation. ‘All getters of wealth increase their hoard of coin without limit.’ The great difference between Aristotle and us is that for him insatiability was a pathology, not a normal state of affairs. To base an entire economy on the principle of ‘always more’ would have struck him as insanity.

Aristotle contrasted accumulation in the bad,

‘To cut with a sharp knife a bright green watermelon on a big scarlet plate of a summer afternoon,’ wrote the Qing Dynasty scholar Chin Shengt’an. ‘Ah, is this not happiness?’

limitless sense with the noble art of husbandry, whose goal is strictly finite. We should strive to acquire such items as are necessary for a ‘good life’ – a life proper to creatures such as ourselves – and no more. Aristotle’s good life is not exactly to our taste. His ideal was a patriarchal, slave-holding city-state, where cultured gentlemen passed their time in philosophy and political deliberation. But the more general notion that a certain way of life is intrinsically desirable, with wealth strictly a means thereto, is enormously appealing. Every great world civilisation, our own excepted, has held ▶

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INTERLUDE

◀ something like it. Medieval monks, Confucian mandarins and Buddhist sages all elaborated ideals of life ranging from the austere ascetic to the lusciously aesthetic. 'To cut with a sharp knife a bright green watermelon on a big scarlet plate a summer afternoon,' wrote the Qing Dynasty scholar Chin Shengt'an. 'Ah, is this not happiness?'

How can we explain the disappearance of any such vision from today's society? The answer is partly sociological. The old institutional bearers of the idea of the good life were the Church and the landed aristocracy (even if most individual churchmen and aristocrats fell ludicrously short of the ideal). Those institutions have now lost almost all public influence. The cultural elite from which Keynes sprang has become an introverted coterie. Our public takes its cue from TV shows such as Big Brother and The X-Factor, where the aim is not to do anything well but simply to triumph over other participants.

The good life's eclipse also has an intellectual dimension. The dominant philosophies of the modern age forbid us to think of any one way of life as intrinsically more desirable than any other. All ways of life, insofar as they are freely chosen and do not violate the rights or interests of others, are ethically on a par. There is no such thing as the good life, only a range of 'permissible lifestyles'. This set of assumptions is deeply entrenched in the economics profession, which makes it unsurprising that economists are unwilling to formulate a criterion of sufficiency. To do so would be to commit the (in their eyes) unpardonable sin of 'paternalism'.

The disappearance of the idea of the good life explains the intensity of positional competition in our society. Of course, envy has always been a powerful force in human affairs, but at least in the past it was held in check by equally powerful prohibitions and ideals. Now that those prohibitions and ideals have lost their grip on us, what can save us from the rat race that you so dourly outline?

Dear Edward,

I think your pessimism is too global. You're right that the main currents of the last century failed to put any check on growth, but we've seen the emergence of powerful countercurrents, most notably the green movement. Modern environmentalism may speak the utilitarian language of sustainability, but its deeper passion is clearly romantic and ethical. Rousseau is its spiritual grandfather. If only environmentalists could admit to such allegiances, instead of hiding behind the mask of scientific objectivity. Far from weakening their position, it would make it that much more persuasive and appealing.

Environmentalism aside, there is clearly growing disenchantment with consumer capitalism. Accepting a cut in income for the sake of quality of life is common enough to have

acquired a name: downsizing. Magazines such as the Idler are devoted to it. But I have limited faith in the power of individual initiative to get us off the growth treadmill. For social animals such as ourselves, the good life is a life shared with others; it implies common institutions, common practices, common standards of judgements. It is hard to downsize if your peers are all upsizing. Your previously shared amusements will become

'A promising measure would be to grant all adults a basic income, leaving it to them to decide how much to work. This would make part-time work viable for many'

beyond your pocket; you must be strong-willed indeed not to fall prey to resentment. The Christian ideal of noble poverty has more or less vanished from our society. All the incentives push upwards, not downwards.

This is where the state can play a role, by creating conditions in which ideals of simple living might gain some traction. One immediate target should be inequality, which has risen steadily since the 1980s. Inequality is the engine that drives the growth treadmill. Where the rich are able to scope up the best things in life – top schools, top real estate, top holiday resorts – the struggle to join their ranks becomes ferocious, negating much of the civilising effect of affluence. A more strenuously redistributive tax policy would help. Another promising measure would be to grant all adults an unconditional basic income, leaving it to them to decide how much to work. This would make part-time work a viable option for many, and could easily be afforded by rich societies. Less drastic measures might include the revival of sumptuary laws – taxes on luxury articles – and extending existing limits on advertising. Some of these measures clearly involve the heresy of paternalism. 'Who are you to decide,' we can hear voices rise in protest, 'what is a luxury and what is not?' But that is a bullet I am happy to bite.

Robert Skidelsky is Emeritus Professor of Political Economy at Warwick University. His latest book is Keynes: The Return of the Master (Penguin Allen Lane)

Edward Skidelsky is Lecturer in Philosophy at Exeter University. He is the author of Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture (Princeton University Press), and is Robert's son

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SELF-SERVING HALF TRUTHS TRICK US

KEY NOTE WILL HUTTON

Capitalism has been undermined by an abuse of the very principle that is its cornerstone: fairness. It is essential that we reclaim the idea of just rewards

Plato first argued the case for proportionality and it is telling that justice in so many cultures is signified by a pair of scales. Retribution should be proportional to the crime. But so should reward be proportional to our extra effort. It is a fundamental part of human beings' hard wiring. The scales symbolically declare that justice is getting our due and proportional deserts.

The irony is that capitalism if it is run properly is a means for people to get just that. If they are a brilliant entrepreneur or innovator then it is fair that they should get their proper due desert and make considerable if proportional profits. In fact inventions are never the result of one individual light bulb moment but the consequence of a lot of social and public investment. Thus a proportion of the profit should go to the state as taxation, as its due desert for having collectively invested in the infrastructure and cumulative stock of knowledge from which invention draws – not least so it can repeat the exercise for the next generation. But the big point is that big rewards are justifiable if they are in proportion to big efforts – because big effort grows the economic pie for everyone. Profit is ethical to the extent it is proportionate to effort and not due to good luck or use of brute power. Taxation is ethical to the extent it is proportional to what the state has collectively provided.

Few capitalists think like this. Instead they like to characterise themselves as individualistic hunter gatherers, being able to eat what they kill – and if they kill more than the next man or woman, they get to eat more. My property is my own because I and I only have sweated my brow to get it; I have autonomy over it and no claim to share it, especially by the state, is legitimate. This is the cult of the investment banker or financial trader out to cut the next big deal or be a nanosecond faster than his or her competitor to buy or sell some financial instrument. It is only fair, they argue, that half a bank's revenues should get paid out in bonuses after each year's trading. The hunter gatherers have to divide the kill once a year – and the

annual bonus fest is a kind of primitive celebration of their prowess.

But not even hunter gatherers hunted alone; they worked in packs and teams. And we also know that they quickly worked out the role of luck in being successful. They might not find animals to kill, not because they were not good hunters but because unaccountably there were no animals to kill. But if they returned to the cave empty handed they would expect to share in some other hunters' kill. Co-operation and a fair hand out of the spoils was an essential part of the hunter gatherers' existence – if only for survival's sake.

The primitives knew that if you don't run an economy and society fairly, it quickly becomes dysfunctional, but this is not part of today's banker worldview or culture. Lloyd Blankfein, CEO of Goldman Sachs, defends the astonishing earnings he and his colleagues, along with other investment bankers, make as God's work. The logic is that society needs risk-taking bankers to generate credit flows, finance entrepreneurial enterprise and generally grow the economic pie for all. We should be grateful that they have got back on their feet so quickly; and grateful that they are prospering. So in time will all of us. If they make fabulous returns that is proportional to their effort and contribution – just as football stars make fabulous returns.

This set of propositions, for so long uncontested, is a series of self-serving half truths. Why are bankers able to get so much more reward for their proportional and extra effort than any other profession or occupation? Is the economic value added in making a loan, buying a share or securitising an income stream so much greater than building a jet engine, creating a life-saving drug or writing a transformative piece of new software? People work hard in many walks of life and cannot dream of earning what a banker earns. Moreover the trading in money is not so much more valuable than any other form of economic activity that it deserves such privileges. This is not God's work. It is an old-fashioned rigged market by a bunch of smart insiders who have managed to get away with it for decades because hard questions were never asked about fairness or proportionality. And to add insult to injury, when the sky fell in on what was a gigantic Ponzi scheme it was governments, backed by ordinary tax-payers, that launched a bail out to save the economy – but in the process also bankers.

Of course intellectual mistakes were made about risk management techniques. Assumptions were ►

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PART TWO • Economics as if ethics matters

‘Profit is ethical to the extent it is proportionate to effort and not due to good luck or brute power’

◀ made about economic behaviour that proved wholly wrong. But at the heart of the financial crisis – and the criticism of the recovery – lay disregard for fairness. The bankers cast themselves as hunter gatherers who owed nothing to anybody and could eat what they killed careless of tomorrow. Banks ran down the capital at the core of their balance sheets, not replenishing and adding to it – but paying it out in dividends and bonuses. If they had paid out just 20 per cent less, calculates the Bank of England, between 2000 and 2007 they would have reserved more than the state paid out in bail-out capital.

A credit default swap, allegedly insuring a security from the risk of default, is not a fair transaction if the insurer has no idea about the security’s creditworthiness and is doing no more than issuing odds on a bet. A bank is not fair if it sells a buyer an asset whose promise to pay interest cannot be met because it depends upon sub-prime mortgages. It is not fair to bet ordinary depositors’ savings on gambling in the derivative markets. It is not fair to press for rules to be changed to allow all this, knowing that the state will pick up the tab when, and if, things go wrong. It is not fair to pay such high bonuses knowing that the bank is becoming riskier and riskier. And it is not fair to pay such high bonuses in recovery when the whole system has only survived courtesy of the tax-payer – hardly due desert for discretionary effort.

Bankers understood none of this then, and little of it now. They have a tin ear to fairness. But that was the consequence of allowing markets to be as rigged and jerrymandered as the financial markets have been – with no leverage caps, no rules on derivative trading, easily circumvented rules on capital and an anything-goes attitude to financial trading. Capitalism was run abusing all the principles of fairness. When cave dwellers were unfair, they died. When capitalism is unfair, we have financial crashes. Ethics and justice, it turns out, are the indispensable values to underpin successful capitalism.

*Will Hutton is Executive Vice Chair of the Work Foundation and a columnist for the Observer. His new book *Them and Us* (Little, Brown) is published in the autumn*

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HOW SHAREHOLDER VALUE TOOK OVER

KEY NOTE ADITYA CHAKRABORTTY

Economic fundamentalism has crowded out alternative ways of thinking, leaving scant room for social considerations

At the dawn of the Thatcher revolution, right-wing economists began using a short phrase that was very long on impact. They talked about crowding out, a situation in which a free-spending government sucks up money and workers that would otherwise have been at the disposal of the private sector. It was a term that nicely summed up the shrink-the-state argument and it continues to echo in contemporary political debate. When David Cameron says, 'There is such a thing as society, it's just not the same as the state', he is (probably consciously) using the rhetoric of crowding out.

There are, to be honest, many problems with that economic argument but, 30 years into the era of free-market fundamentalism, it's very helpful for doing one thing: describing the dangerous dominance of economics itself. When it comes to making public policy or running businesses, economics – and a narrow, un-nuanced economics at that – has crowded out other ways of thinking.

Crowding out has happened on university campuses, where economics is no longer just one social science among many but has grabbed land off the others. Ambitious academics ignore the bread-and-butter studies of how economies work, but use economic thinking to assert (as Nobel laureate Gary Becker does) that families have children partly for financial reasons, say, or (as Freakonomist Steven Levitt does) that American women like to dabble in prostitution if it can be made worth their while. Crowding out has happened in American courts, where judges now typically take enforcing economic efficiency as a key duty.

Most importantly, economics has got government thinking in a choke-hold. Consider for a moment the language now used in Whitehall. Fretful about how neo-liberal economics has undermined community ties? Politicians and officials will really sit up and listen if you rename community as 'social capital'. Anxious about poor educational achievement? Try referring to it as 'human capital'. Worried by environmental degrada-

tion? Try taking off that linguistic woolly jumper and slipping on the bespoke term 'natural capital'.

Society; education; the environment: these are all things that we surely consider good in themselves, yet they are now dressed up as items on a balance sheet. During the dotcom boom, web entrepreneurs would try to convince their investors that their ideas would yield cash – that they could be 'monetised'. A decade on, and an activist lobbying Whitehall needs to show how their ideas can be capitalised.

As some of these examples suggest, this great disciplinary crowding-out has pushed aside ethical considerations. Far outside the Treasury, policy-making takes the encouragement of economic efficiency as one of its primary purposes – and then squeezes in other considerations. The result can be myopic ingenuity, so that the answer to greedy bankers recklessly chasing annual bonuses is apparently clever tweaking of their incentive schemes. Or it's often weak: MPs upset as yet another renowned British manufacturer is flogged off to a foreign firm, will make fiery speeches about jobs but cling to the dogma of free and open markets.

To be clear, economics does have space for considerations of right and wrong, and markets do not have to be at odds with ethical behaviour. But if we take as a definition of ethical practice the accommodation of our own and others' needs and weaknesses then economics erodes such considerations. And in practice, neo-liberal economics – by, say, insisting on listed companies being run according to shareholder value above all else – often creates conditions inimical to ethical behaviour.

Anyone wishing to point up the importance of ethics in economics can make a strong case. Look at Adam Smith, the discipline's godfather, you might say – not just his work on moral philosophy but that founding text *The Wealth of Nations*. There Smith talks repeatedly about the importance of trust in business relationships and lays out the case that in a market economy, one can only thrive by acknowledging others' needs and wants. Gordon Gekko was economically illiterate, one might conclude: greed is not good; self-interest is.

In this telling, economic agents are 'constrained maximisers' – out for themselves, but not to the point of grinding the competition into the dust. I will help my neighbours when it's apparent that doing so will help me too, or at least not harm my interests – but I won't help a stranger on the other side of the planet, especially if it will prevent me from getting on. ►

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‘Shareholder value is shorthand for doing whatever it takes to pump up the stock price’

◀ The Nobel prize-winner Amartya Sen characterises this as the difference between sympathy and commitment. In his book, sympathy is the recognition that one’s welfare is affected by others; while commitment is the drive simply to right a wrong, whatever the cost. Economics is great at considerations of sympathy, but it stutters over commitment.

Central to the problem of trying to reconcile economics and ethics are the crude assumptions about human motives that inform so much economics. According to the models, people are rational, self-seeking and nigh-on omniscient and are able to express their preferences through free and open markets. Thanks to around three decades of research by behavioural economists and the holes they have punched in the notion of rational self-seekers, policy-makers now acknowledge that individuals do not always act in their own best interests. But they remain poor at recognising that people sometimes act against their own interests – and indeed should often be encouraged to do so.

In the world of business, the crowding-out is even clearer to see. Firms are now run according to the dictates of shareholder value; the investor’s interests take precedence over those of the management, employees and business partners or customers. It was not always so. In her excellent recent book, *Liquidated*, Karen Ho provides an anthropological study of Wall Street. The dominance of shareholder value looms large.

‘Wall Street’s moral blueprint’, she terms it – the magnetic north of finance theory, the prayer that bankers demand company executives recite at all times. Yet shareholder interests have often been run close by an alternative, managerialism.

In 1919, Ford motor company was taken to court by the aptly-named Dodge Brothers – shareholders aggrieved that all the executives seemed to want was to ‘produce good products cheaply and to provide increasing employment at good wages and only incidentally to make money’. They argued that the primary purpose of joint-stock companies was to produce returns for shareholders – and the Michigan supreme court judge agreed.

But the battle between shareholders and managers continued over the rest of the century. In 1978, the Business Roundtable – 200 chief executives of the biggest, most influential American firms – listed social responsibility as one of the four core functions of a company’s board. Just three years later, it described balancing shareholder expectations of maximum returns against other priorities as the greatest challenge facing managers. By 1990, social responsibility had dropped

off the radar altogether. Shareholders had won.

The era of managers’ rule wasn’t some kind of golden age for corporate ethics: executives, whether at Ford or anywhere else, were also concerned with profits, high incomes for the men in the corner offices and all the rest. But as Ho correctly argues, shareholder value has become shorthand for doing whatever it takes to pump up the stock price. What’s the rationale for mass layoffs in the name of shareholder value, she asks one Wall Street financier: ‘Is it like, ‘We’re becoming more efficient, we’re hoping the company grows, so in the long term people will have more jobs?’” To his credit, the banker rejects her offered alibi. ‘Well, we can wing it like that,’ he says. ‘For me, it is all about getting the share price up.’

In the kind of environment fostered by shareholder value – short-term, insecure, driven by profit – there can be little space for ethical considerations. And yet that approach to running firms is shifting from the private sector to the public. One of last year’s best books about work focused on the Royal Mail, a public sector institution lined up for privatisation. Called *Dear Granny Smith* and written by the splendidly-pseudonymed Roy Mayall, it described how postal workers were being forced to put economic efficiency before public service.

‘Time, Peter Mandelson. Time,’ Mayall pretends-addresses the business secretary. “‘Time is money,” you say, but I say, “Time is service.”” He mentions occasions when he has taken time to help customers – an old lady who had knocked over her zimmer frame and couldn’t get up or a recent widower who asked him to return any letters addressed to his dead wife.

What Mayall highlights is the ultimate effect of all this crowding out. Ethical behaviour of the kind he describes would be viewed by Sen as acting out of commitment. It adds time to Mayall’s round, gets him into trouble with his bosses, and he is not going to get any direct reward. But are we happy to leave this sort of behaviour to the off-chance, to the prospect of a postie who doesn’t mind the hassle? I suspect not.

Ethical practice requires space in policy-making away from considerations of economic efficiency, and space in corporations away from the drive for shareholder value. Ultimately, such space can only be created by resisting the dominance of economics.

Aditya Chakraborty is economics leader writer for the Guardian

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PART TWO • Economics as if ethics matters

A FREE MARKET IS A MORAL MARKET

KEY NOTE JOHN MILBANK

The financial meltdown has pitched democracy itself into crisis. It is vital we overthrow the assumptions that undermine trust, gift-giving and meaning

The recent financial crisis does not foreshadow the end of capitalism. However, it both reminds us of something and reveals something new. It reminds us that capitalism is subject to a peculiar sort of economic crisis: a crisis of speculation, not of natural disaster or human ineptitude. But it also reveals that globalisation has so expanded and speeded up the processes of change as to engender something qualitatively different. Unrestricted movements of international finance now severely curtail government freedom of action through a process that puts democracy itself into crisis. The excess capital of emerging markets like China and the Gulf States can be quickly transferred to countries with low savings and soaring consumption like the USA and the UK. This has in part generated the recent severe economic destabilisation. In response, governments have had to bail out the banks by taking over their debts in a fashion that locks politics still more into the amoral economic pursuit of private profit. This overrides the goals politics should have, of promoting a social order which nurtures human well-being.

However, the market economy need not necessarily be amoral. This characterises only our own economic system, which operates according to certain theoretical assumptions. What are these assumptions? First, there is the excessive practice of representing things by abstract numbers. The result is that even the bankers themselves barely know what is going on, because they are speculating in terms of increasingly rarefied financial products where the chain of connections back to the real economy is scarcely traceable.

This dominance of the abstract leads to the loss of what things are worth and mean to us. It destroys their human value, in fact. For example, the house I live in is worth more to me than just its market price because it affords me at once material shelter and emotional resonance. We usually think of the world around us in this integrated way. Yet our economy depends for its very operation upon the stripping out of meaning. This

sundering *de-sacralises* the world. Thus things leached of significance can be treated as objects to be manipulated. When the land itself is treated like this, the earth's surface becomes ecologically desolate. Equally, when human beings are reduced to mere bodies, they become little more than sources of labour supply. Everything becomes measurable, on one numerical scale. This renders even money itself overly abstract. Instead of being regarded as an instrument of exchange that assesses comparative financial value, and reflects worth in the deeper sense too, it is seen as something that can be unproblematically bought and sold, encouraging usurious processes that may severely exploit human misfortune and limit human freedom.

In this way, genuine meaning is dissolved in the ether of sheer calculation, while material reality is cruelly wrenched away from all affective attachments.

However, if globalisation encourages such nomadic detachment from reality, it also paradoxically ensures that what has been reduced to a mere number must in the end relate back to the real economy. To put it one way, debt always catches up with you. This is the story of what's happened in Dubai. If you live on one globe, there is eventually nowhere to hide. Moreover, the total separation of meaning from thing does not make sense even in market terms. For since we are embodied creatures, disembodied capital must in the end be measured against something material. Otherwise we have no way finally to guarantee its value, and without value capital loses its purpose.

Just as our current economic system divides thing from meaning, it also tries to divide the individual from the group. So the second assumption is that the wellbeing of the firm – the commercial organisation that should properly help build society – takes second place to that of the individuals in it. This is illustrated by the 'bonus culture'. But again, there are limits. After all, even bankers do not operate as lone rangers, but require banks in order to operate with best effect. Neoclassical economics struggled to incorporate a full understanding of the role of the firm into its theory, as it focused on markets – on market equilibrium and the idea that markets automatically record exact information. But today, economists recognise that no system is in the long run stable; that a rational individual can sometimes produce irrational results. This is where the firm comes in. People have to work together to help mitigate the damaging effects of irrational

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PART TWO • Economics as if ethics matters

‘What human beings most desire is not material wealth, but social recognition’

◀ behaviour, and to ensure the supply of reasonably reliable information upon which to act.

However, despite recognising the necessity of collaboration, economics for a while tried perversely to understand even the firm in individualistic terms. This gave rise to what is known as public choice theory, which has influenced New Labour and has been applied to governmental as well as private organisations. For this theory, employees and civil servants alike are self-serving creatures whose main aim is creaming-off benefits of prestige and wealth for themselves. In consequence, firms cannot trust their employees, giving rise to our current culture of targets, incentives, bonuses and endlessly employing new employees to check up on other employees.

The crucial irony here is that this sort of individualistic bias is actually inimical to a genuinely free market. For such a culture of pervasive mistrust inevitably inhibits those qualities of initiative, risk and creativity on which competitive enterprise depends. Instead, we need to learn from minority traditions of political economy which have always stressed that social sympathy is a vital part of economics. Those aspects of natural human concern must be recognised as being crucial to the successful functioning of markets, as well as being found in civil society and the welfare state: civil society and the welfare state should not be viewed as compensating for the supposed impersonal indifference of the market. Indeed, the more contracts between people are based on trust, then the less you need the intervention of state control. The individualistic model of the market economy has paradoxically increased the power of the state, whose laws are required to ensure that contracts are honoured, reducing the place of trust in our society.

It follows that, amazingly enough, a genuinely free market must be a moral market in order to be free. For it is only when trust and other human values are honoured that market players can truly find the freedom to innovate and take risks.

If the economics of egoism doesn't work for the firm, then it turns out that it doesn't work at any level whatsoever. Here anthropology refutes our third false assumption which derives from Adam Smith, according to which a free market works because it recognises that human beings are fundamentally self-seeking. But we are not primarily 'trucking' animals seeking a good deal, but instead are gift-exchanging animals. For what human beings most desire is not material wealth,

but social recognition. Because this is always a mutual affair, we are rarely either purely interested or purely disinterested actors. Thus every human action can be seen as a gift which half-expects but cannot compel a return gift. When we invite someone to dinner we half-obligate them to return the favour, even though we cannot enforce this! When we greet someone in the morning, courtesy compels a reply, even though it cannot be demanded! This is because the aim of such interactions is unlike a legal contract that can be enforced, but is rather the kind of exchange that draws human beings together. And even contracts, which legitimately serve individuals, must also ultimately promote such bonding, else society is gradually eroded and, as we have already seen, economic enterprise is itself inhibited.

So trust is basic for the firm, and basic also for the relationships of an ethically responsible firm to the wider society. A further thought follows from this too, namely that it is the firm based on trust, more than the lone entrepreneur, which inhibits monopolies. For on the basis of self-interest, people strive for monopolies in order to produce things with the least possible outlay of time and skill and to sell their products as dearly as they can. Thereby they undermine competitors, and bad practice drives out good. By contrast, in the case of the firm that is a mutually-disciplining partnership between committed, fully-liable lenders, investors, managers, workers and consumers, good practice can drive out bad in a tendency that is actually more stable. This is the story of John Lewis at its best. Such firms will tend to thrive in the long term, not by driving out all other competitors, but rather by forcing other firms to compete in terms of quality of produce, fairness of pricing, and humane treatment of workers and customers.

For much of human experience, bad habits appear more powerful than good ones. But in the end, we discover that good habits are more enduring. And that even the free pursuit of material wealth requires also the pursuit of human virtue.

John Milbank is Professor in Religion, Politics and Ethics at the University of Nottingham. His many books include Theology and Social Theory (WileyBlackwell) and the co-authored Radical Orthodoxy (Routledge)

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RADICAL ROAD TO A GREENER ECONOMY

KEY NOTE STEWART WALLIS

An economy bounded by resource limits means getting the price mechanism right so that it tells the ecological and social truth

They may not quite be the four horsemen of the apocalypse, but there is no doubt that humanity's basic problem has four inter-linked parts. First, we are already living well beyond our planet's capacity to regenerate itself. Many of our ecosystems are at risk of collapse, from fish stocks and coral reefs, and from fresh water to pollination systems. Above all, we face the real prospect of catastrophic climate change.

Secondly, not only is global inequality in income and wealth untenable - the richest one per cent of people earns as much as the poorest 57 per cent - but trying to grow the world out of poverty by raising everybody's incomes further is ecologically impossible. The Earth just can't provide the resources that the growth would need. Thirdly, our economic system is highly unstable. That was confirmed in the banking collapse. Fourthly, for many people on earth, 'more' and 'better' have parted company. More wealth is not translating into greater wellbeing.

All at sea

Each of these problems is recognised by policy-makers, but only to some degree. What they don't recognise is the way they link together, their systemic nature and their inter-relationships. That is why governments seem to be all at sea when it comes to solutions. What is on offer is a return to 'business as usual' with a green tint.

Why so? First, our macro-economic systems are increasingly based on flawed assumptions and outdated myths. Secondly, we lack an agreed ethical compass to help us address this set of problems. Thirdly, the necessary changes seem to be impossible.

"Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist," wrote the great economist John Maynard Keynes. But the myths of the defunct economists also have a life after death. They seem to underpin the system as it stands, frustrating new thinking and new solutions. 'Growth is

the answer'. 'Prices tell the truth'. 'GDP measures are what matters to us'. 'Markets are fair'. 'Anglo-Saxon capitalism is the only or best system.' Our current economic mess exposes these myths as either redundant or as partial truths that need altering through political processes. Blind adherence to them has given us an economy which is run in the interests of the most powerful. The problem is that, actually, the myths tend to suit the powerful very well, and that blinds them to the problem.

The philosophical underpinnings of economic thought are not helpful in a situation where even when individual actions are ethical, collective outcomes may not be. If we are living beyond our planet's regenerative capacity, then obviously decisions about consumption by one group of people have major implications for other people - those who are still alive and those who are still to be born.

Worse, inequality has been conclusively shown to be the major driver of social problems, however rich or poor any society is. In this situation, neither a utilitarian approach nor a freedom and rights-based, individualistic approach is sufficient any more. We need to focus on collective outcomes and to agree a set of ethical principles that could govern our economy in this new situation.

Change seems impossible because companies need ever-increasing consumption just to stay profitable. Governments need to grow their economies to raise the tax revenues to provide public services. Most people also want to consume more 'stuff'. This is a seemingly virtuous circle except for the fact that it is the main driver of the systemic problems we face. Nor can we just apply the brakes. That would lead to fundamental structural changes which will take us back into recession.

It is no wonder, then, that we enter 2010, after Copenhagen, in a state of confusion and disorder.

Principles for an ethical economy

The word 'economy' comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*. *Oikonomia* literally means the management or stewardship of the household. That's what an economy needs to do - to manage the planetary household in the interests of the planet and the people.

Using this as the way forward does point towards a new set of ethical principles. They also derive from the best thinking of societies and religions over the ages, and from current scientific work and our growing understanding of how different systems operate. I offer them as examples of the type of principles ►

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‘That the economy should meet human needs means we have to focus on needs, not wants’

◀ that are needed.

- 1) The economy should meet human needs and improve quality of life.
- 2) The economy is bounded by ecosystem limits.
- 3) Equity for present and future generations.
- 4) Reverence for all life.
- 5) Appropriate scale and optimal diversity.

These principles can sound like common sense. But they are a good deal tougher when you look at the implications of applying them in practice. I have deliberately put forward some radical implications to make the point.

That the economy should be designed to meet human needs means we have to focus on needs, not wants. It would mitigate against the endless creation of unnecessary wants. This in turn might suggest a ban or tax on certain types of advertising. Most fundamentally, it would mean we would have to implement in full the UN Declaration of Human Rights, with its focus on the social and economic rights of all human beings. The obligation would be on individual governments to meet those economic rights and where they were unable to do so, it would fall to the international system to take up the responsibility. This would mean mechanisms of global taxation and redistribution that we have developed within many countries but never before on a global scale.

This principle would require different measurement systems that judged success in terms of improving human wellbeing in ways that were both socially just and environmentally sustainable. It would be vital to have a measurement system that replaced GDP and gave weight to human wellbeing, to economic performance and stability, and to the ecological health of the planet. This principle would also require a much greater focus on the core economy – the non-monetised economy including all the work of child rearing, caring and community support.

Second, an economy bounded by ecosystem limits means getting prices right so that they tell the ecological and social truth. It means a change in taxation, from taxing employment and value added to taxing non-renewable material consumption. In other words, it means a fundamental shift from taxing good things to bad things. This would be part of an even more fundamental shift to an economy which minimises the weight of materials that go through it. That would direct the economy to focus on improving human wellbeing, on closed loop production systems and on very low con-

sumption of non-renewables. It would be a fundamental shift from our current consumer economy.

Third, equity for present and future generations again requires massive changes. For a start, how do we distribute planetary resources more fairly? The principle is actually very simple: all people should have an equal claim. Those who are using more than their fair share of global resources should pay a rental to those using less than their fair share. If this principle were to be applied, it would be one of the most massive economic changes the world has seen.

The other key change here would be to start effectively managing the power of key players within markets. Only by tackling unequal power distributions within markets can we hope to build a more equitable and viable world for the future. It would also require a major change in company structure and law. No longer could companies be designed for the prime benefit of the providers of private capital, and the whole issue of ownership and control would need to be thoroughly explored too.

Fourth, reverence for life means moving from an anthropocentric to bio-centric approach. It also means factoring in the mystical, the spiritual, the existential, the symbolic and the aesthetic. It means recognising all forms of life as part of the economic system, not outside it. Water, minerals, sea, and land: these are natural planetary systems where we can only be stewards, never owners.

Finally, when it comes to appropriate scale and optimal diversity, policy makers tend to think in terms of economies of scale. They can be vital in certain systems, but in many other systems optimal diversity requires us to develop on a smaller scale. Local economies thrive best where there is a diversity of businesses. The same is true across farming systems where local responsiveness is crucial. The objective must be interdependence and communities that look outwards to the rest of the world.

The principles are simple. Putting them into practice would fundamentally alter our economic system. We would move then from one that has lost its ethical compass to one that is based on clear principles. We have very short time to act, and no alternative.

Stewart Wallis is Executive Director of the New Economics Foundation. www.neweconomics.org

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TALKING POINTS

A labour of kindness

The ideology of the free market has distorted human relationships, but the signs are that we may finally be waking up to what we've lost, says [Sue Gerhardt](#)

Perhaps future generations will look back on this time as a turning point – the time when humans began to gain a perspective on the whole period of industrial capitalism and the destruction it wrought, not only on the environment but also on human relationships. Such is our current frustration with so many aspects of our society, that it seems we are finally beginning to question the ideology of the free market, and its assumptions that we must compete, look out for ourselves, and put care and concern for others in second place. The ethical vacuum at the heart of capitalism, its inability to distinguish between what is right or wrong behaviour towards others, as long as it makes a profit, is no longer viewed with quite the same tolerance.

It is hard to see something clearly when you are immersed in it. Once systems are established, we come to believe that they are natural and inevitable. During transition periods, however, people do protest and people did protest the wrecking of relationships during the period of industrialisation. The writer Thomas Carlyle, for example, complained at the time that cash-payment had replaced mutual helpfulness to become 'the sole relation of human beings'.

Although he recognised that many people now 'eat finer cookery, drink dearer liquors', he questioned whether human faces looked at each other with more 'satisfaction' than before, and concluded, 'Not so'. Whether or not he was right, mass production was certainly built on depersonalised relationships. People entering factories and workshops were seen as mere 'hands' - cogs in the mechanical process - not as neighbours, friends, or even enemies. Lacking social bonds with their employers, the working relationship became a purely contractual one that excluded empathy or even the traditional paternalistic notion of a duty to others.

In theory, this new impersonal economy was liberating for everyone. No longer tied to their allotted place in society, people could at last choose who they were and what they did. We are still in love with this idea of freedom, and the 'rights' that protect it. But although we gained greater social mobility and individualism, our freedoms made us more vulnerable. The sustaining web of relationships on which people had depended, shrivelled. Family life, in particular, was undermined, as members of the family

Q&A

LUKE JOHNSON
FOUNDER OF RISK CAPITAL PARTNERS AND
FORMER CHAIRMAN OF CHANNEL 4

How significant was the MPs' expenses row, from an ethical point of view?

I think we sometimes forget that, by international standards, public servants in Britain are among the most honest in the world. You only have to do modest amounts of business in places like Italy, South America and the Asian sub-continent to realise that there are standards of behaviour that we take for granted here that are profoundly different in other parts of the world. In many countries they'd look at something like the MPs' expenses story and say – that's very small beer indeed. I'm not saying we couldn't, or shouldn't, try harder or do better, but I do think it's worth putting it into perspective.

Were people right to be outraged?

Another thing to bear in mind is that there's a heightened sense of outrage at the moment that's to do with the economic downturn, coupled with the fact that the internet has made us all feel a lot more empowered. There are different levels of dishonesty, and we should be aware of that. Obviously fiddling expenses is a very clear dishonesty; but in lots of instances the situation is much less clear-cut. What about people who sit as trustees or who are on boards and who adhere to a consensus in a weak manner, unwilling to rebel against the crowd even when they think something doesn't feel quite right?

What was the ethical framework that surrounded you as a child?

I remember serious discussions in my family about what was the right thing to do – particularly about beliefs, and about the importance of being

prepared to be in a minority of one if you were convinced about something being right.

How about these days?

One thing that's important to me is I don't want to pursue business exclusively, because I think it's important to be part of other worlds too. I've spent six years as chair of Channel 4, and frankly it's not the most profitable thing I could have done with my time. But it was about duty, and it was also enjoyable. And I think it's healthy for business people to have other work that's not exclusively about personal gain – I think that helps with your broader outlook and your moral compass too.

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◀ no longer worked alongside each other with a common purpose. Although there were important attempts to create solidarity and mutual support in the trade union and co-operative movements, basically everyone got used to living in an economy that left little space for the important part played by relationships in our lives, particularly in sustaining our sense of self-worth and our feeling of belonging.

Instead, the free-standing, independent 'self' was idealised, as if each person could choose to make what he could of himself without reference to the context in which he lived or the nurture he received. This greatly advantaged the rising middle classes, whose autonomy and selfhood was built on the hidden 'emotion work' done by women. These better-off families were able to give financial support to women so that they could provide attentive and personalised care for their children - a stark contrast to the often desperate conditions of working-class child-rearing. For a century or more, it became the aspiration of the working classes for their wives to stay at home and care for their young children and, eventually, most families achieved it.

Capitalism's displacement of care

But there was a fly in the ointment. In the increasingly narcissistic society of the late 20th century, the burden on women of sustaining the values of kindness and empathy became an impossible one. And the better off everyone got, the more isolated women became, stuck in their individual homes, looking after just a couple of children without any adult life of their own. It was intolerable for many women, and the most confident of them - largely those who had the benefit of higher education - began to protest, demanding the right to work and earn money on the same terms as men. Their campaign was amazingly successful. Change was rapid, and it soon became the norm for all mothers to work, even when their children were small - today, increasingly even when they are babes in arms. The values of 'care', however, which women had previously guarded, became even harder to locate as the pursuit of money and status spiralled, unchecked.

As we know, the economic bubble came crashing down. But, in a sense, another bubble is currently deflating, too: the bubble of blind faith in this system as the best of all possible systems. We are starting to realise how much we have sacrificed on the altar of material wellbeing. In particular, we can no longer ignore the impact on children of a completely workaholic society where few give priority to children's needs. It is becoming impossible not to see that increasing numbers of poorly socialised children are showing difficulties in handling stress or managing their emotions. Scientific research has made it plain that many of these difficulties are the result of a lack of time, attention and emotional teaching from the adults in their lives. Without these things, young ▶

Q&A

DALEY THOMPSON
OLYMPIC-WINNING SPORTSMAN

What was the ethical framework around your growing-up years?

My family was quite dysfunctional in some ways, but one thing both my parents did believe in, very strongly, was knowing the difference between right and wrong. And the value of hard work was important too - my mum was of Scottish descent, and she had that Protestant work ethic that had been handed down, generation on generation. I grew up in Notting Hill, but before it was remotely trendy. It was a tough neighbourhood but people were good to one another - the sort of place where you could leave your front door unlocked and know everything would be safe, a place where kids could play out in the street and everyone would look out for them. Times are different now - in those days there was a more 'other-orientated' moral culture. These days, it's a lot more about 'me'.

How does that 'me' culture pan out in the sports world?

Sportspeople like me and those of my era - Seb Coe and Tessa Sanderson among them - didn't train and work hard because we wanted fame or wealth. Making money didn't even come into my head, and there was no possibility of it anyway because we were the last generation of amateurs, and it simply wasn't available. We were motivated by the thought of glory, and of doing something for our country. And I'm not saying there aren't youngsters today who think of these things, but I think there are a lot, too, who think mostly about the possibility of fame, and money.

What did you think about the row over MPs' expenses?

The MPs' expenses' saga

proved what most of us already believed: power corrupts. There was a whole host of politicians there, and what they were saying was: do as I say, but not as I do. And with the bankers, it was all very well for some of them to be raking it in when there were good times generally, but now things are tough plenty of people have got the hump about it - and I can understand why. The problem is that, all around, there's a dearth of good leadership. So a lot of people in government aren't the best sort to be there. It's a worry: and the people I worry about most are those who are least able to look after themselves, because I think that in the current moral climate they're in a potentially difficult situation. In the past others would have looked out for them. But these days, I'm not so sure that anyone is.

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◀ children cannot develop their social brains - their empathy, foresight, and self-control - and are prone to become anti-social or depressed adults.

At the same time, there's a growing sense of boredom with the endless round of consumer purchases. Capitalism traps us in this process, making it so much harder to give value to the non-material goods of life: to take pleasure in the natural world, and to enjoy a wide range of relationships, including neighbourliness, friendship, concern for people in need of help - as well as finding time for our everyday relationships with partners and children.

At this crisis point, nothing seems to work: we are in debt, our democracy isn't democratic, our children are miserable, our environment is in danger. It is surely time to consider what capitalism can continue to offer, and whether it has exhausted its potential. Clearly, once women are no longer 'carrying' caring values on behalf of society, the single-minded pursuit of material benefits becomes unbalanced. We are ripe for a new transition - this time, one which encourages human capacities such as empathy and kindness, by reclaiming the importance of relationships.

The Selfish Society by Sue Gerhardt is published by Simon & Schuster on 1 April

TALKING POINTS

A question of cash

Money was meant to make life easier yet, in practice, human nature has made it an end in itself. But is wealth the best way of achieving our desires, asks [Angie Hobbs](#)

Money is a social contract. It requires trust in its symbolic value in order to work at all. And it creates interdependence and mutual interests, even amongst those who are strangers, or who differ profoundly in their beliefs, histories and values. Both of these facts help unpick the state we're in.

Plato's Republic is helpful here. In this dialogue, he outlines the development from scratch of what he claims to be an ideally just state, and money is introduced fairly early on. It facilitates the exchange of basic goods and services so that no one has to produce all their own food, tools and shelter. The function of money is thus to make life easier and provide us with more free time, and its effect is to prompt the development of the city-state.

The trouble, as Plato sees it, is that human psychology makes it very difficult to retain money as the efficient, labour-saving device it was designed to be. Our bodily appetites, he believes, are essentially unlimited, and are not ▶

Q&A

SIR NICHOLAS SEROTA
DIRECTOR OF THE TATE

How much do you think about ethics on a daily basis?

Anyone who works in the public sector at the moment has to give a lot of consideration to principles about why you work in the way you do, and what your long-term goals are. Compared with 20 years ago there's a lot more transparency in public institutions like this one, and a lot more accountability to the people who pay for us, and who visit us. And all that means that someone in my position has to think really carefully about the decisions they make. I'm very aware of the fact that there's a big element of public trust in an institution like this one, and we have to be aware of that and to act responsibly - about, for example, climate change, and thinking about issues around sustainability.

What other ethical considerations do you face?

I'm very aware of issues around our responsibilities to provide artists with a platform for their work. Sometimes that involves me in a lot of ethical thinking, as happened when we showed Mark Wallinger's piece *State Britain* in 2006, and came in for criticism from people who said we shouldn't provide space for a piece of work that was about a one-man protest against the Iraq war. The important thing to remember is that art isn't about reinforcing existing conventions - it exists to change or question the status quo, and sometimes you have to take a moral standpoint to provide that space for questions to be raised, even though others argue that you shouldn't.

What were the ethical considerations in your family, when you were growing up?

Questions of conduct were very

important to my parents. My mother was involved in public service - she was a London councillor - and public service was very important, it was something I was aware of and something that I knew mattered. I was taught that it was important to think about the community as a whole, and not just about your place in it as an individual. I'm sure all this affected my decision to go into museums rather than the art trade. Several of my friends went to work for commercial auction houses after university, and though I have the utmost respect for them, I was definitely drawn myself towards working in the public interest.

Was there any individual outside your family who was a major influence?

David Sylvester, the writer and critic. I worked with him on a couple of shows. He was close to many artists and believed in supporting those who were under attack. I believed in his view. He became a role-model.

How would you sum up what matters most to you?

What matters to me is working to persuade non-believers that art can enrich their lives. I also want to encourage them to have confidence in their own personal response, and to trust their own instincts.

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◀ quelled by the fulfilment of our basic survival needs; hence our appetite for money will also be unlimited. Given that the goods that our appetites desire are, in contrast, often in limited supply, conflict can break out in the struggle to obtain them. One of the messages embedded in Plato's myth of the lost city of Atlantis is that this struggle can lead us to lose everything we have.

Nor do our problems with money end there. We can quickly start desiring money as an end and not just a means, and this desire to hang on to our money and gloat over it can prevent us from buying the things that would satisfy other desires. Fortunately, Plato also holds that we have a rational part of our nature that can guide us. Our desire for and pursuit of money should thus be regulated in accordance with a bigger picture of the good life based on reason. The question, then, is this: how many kinds of desire do humans possess and how many can be served by money?

Disastrous complicity

Other thoughts follow from Plato's example. There is the question of clarity. The language that the contemporary financial sector throws at us needs to be pulled to pieces and rebuilt so that we can understand it. Before the crisis, many bankers, regulators and economists at least gave the impression that only they could understand the complex maths behind increasingly intricate financial engineering, and that everyone else, including politicians, should let them get on with it and just enjoy the increased wealth that they were generating. Most of us, including most politicians, were happy to accept this, or at least not to inquire too closely. And this complicity, of course, was disastrous. If financial procedures and products have indeed become impossible to articulate clearly, then the system really has taken over, and we have far more to worry about than even the banking crisis and recession.

We are all well-equipped to challenge the justice of some of the measures taken to stave off the immediate crisis, which have resulted in prudent savers (and all tax-payers) being penalised to bail out imprudent borrowers and those servicing them. Similarly, we may have moral qualms about quantitative easing, which has enabled banks to access money cheaply and sell it at high rates, thus continuing to profit from their own misconduct. And we can certainly protest against the injustice of continuing massive bonuses to the employees of these banks; furthermore, such bonuses do not necessarily attract those best at banking.

More broadly, we might examine the current queasy and inconsistent mix in our thinking about money, and explore whether a contemporary reworking of an ethics of flourishing or excellence might be more fruitful. We need to think about what it means to flourish, and whether money is the only, or the best, means of achieving our main aims. I may want to buy my niece an expensive

present because I think it would give her pleasure, but perhaps this aim would be more effectively brought about by giving her more of my time.

Virtues are needed too, like courage. Money has been allowed to acquire such an intimidating presence in our culture that it takes courage to grapple with it and put it in its place. Consider what that might mean in education. It would include not only a more prominent role for financial awareness in the curriculum, but also a more explicit recognition that education should not aim solely, or even chiefly, at economic productivity.

It is only when we all develop a deeper understanding of money that we can stop feeling so resentful and fearful about it, and start putting it in its place.

Angie Hobbs is Senior Fellow in the Public Understanding of Philosophy at Warwick University

TALKING POINTS

Time to hit back

The banking oligopoly explains the financial catastrophe and has brought us to our knees. It must be dismantled, argues [Diane Coyle](#)

Bankers' bonuses are not a populist sideshow in the debate about economic policy. Not only do they encourage bankers to take and also create extraordinary risks with the financial system, they have also had a corrosive effect throughout the economy. Research published recently by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that people earning £100,000 a year might think of themselves as normal middle-class earners, but they're in fact in the top one-hundredth of the income distribution. Even a couple with £50,000 a year and two children between them are better off than 70% of the population. Surprised? If so, it's because we hear and see so much about the very rich – that is, the bankers. Their gilded age lifestyles led many people outside the financial sector – elsewhere in business, and in the public sector too – to believe that they needed larger pay packets and bigger bonuses.

In the UK, like the US, the power and prominence of the finance sector meant it set the moral tone for the rest of the economy. It encouraged the pursuit of high incomes as the measure of worth when it has always been clear – although often ignored in post-Thatcher politics – that money only measures one kind of value, and is only one kind of reward.

The pastiche version of economics, the 'free market' variety, which has dominated the political world since the height of the Thatcher and ▶

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PART TWO • Economics as if ethics matters

◀ Reagan era, has given rise to this belief that government and markets are somehow opposites, and we have to choose either one or the other. But the idea of a 'free' market doesn't mean much to most people who actually work as economists. It's a meaningless abstraction. Every market is shaped either by laws and regulations set by government or by informal social rules. How well the market operates depends on this social framework – including the values and ethics it embodies.

Certainly a generation ago, and in tune with the political spirit of the times, economists were far more likely to be practising an ideologically libertarian version of the subject which assumed markets were always 'free' and people always 'rational'. That version survives in some prominent enclaves and always gets a lot of attention. But those assumptions don't define the subject. The key assumption is that people in general act in their own best interests, which actually often involves co-operation.

Offended power

As Adam Smith certainly realised (before his legacy was hijacked for political purposes), markets are social institutions, alongside all the others which shape our economy – businesses, non-profits, unions, families, public sector bodies, and the government. Like any of these others, markets will embody in the way they are set up cultural beliefs, social norms, and power structures too. Anybody who analyses competition will know that the relative power of company executives, employees and consumers will differ hugely from market to market, depending on the number of businesses involved, the transparency of information available, the kind of product or service being sold and many other details.

The political dimension of the market economy has been largely overlooked in debate about the financial crisis, and what to do about it. One exception was a brilliant article by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and former IMF, economist Simon Johnson. In an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* in May 2009 he argued that the banking industry is a mighty oligopoly which has tamed its regulators and the politicians. Looking at the mostly feeble policy reforms introduced since the credit crunch in late 2008, this is a forceful argument. Most serious financial economists believe that increases in capital requirements, the elimination of bonus culture and the break-up of the big banks into smaller ones are required, as quickly as possible. President Barack Obama has at last started to act against the undemocratic power of the big banks, and he will face a fierce battle. The spluttering outrage of senior bankers over even mild measures such as Alistair Darling's bonus tax is the very picture of offended power, and the President's proposal will be bitterly resisted.

The power of the banking oligopoly explains the financial catastrophe. The near-collapse of the

economy was due to the surrender of politicians and regulators to the power of the banking giants. Bankers' bonuses are not even a reflection of market forces but of the power of the oligarchy. We have had nothing like a free market economy. The economy of the noughties was more like the monopoly-dominated economy of the 1920s.

In many – perhaps most – circumstances markets will be the most effective mechanism for co-ordinating the activities of large numbers of people. How effective depends on how good the legal and regulatory framework set by the government is – and on how good the society is. If people largely trust each other, with good reason, and if people's norms of behaviour reflect shared civic values, markets will be a powerful tool for improving social wellbeing.

*Diane Coyle is the director of Enlightenment Economics. Her books include *The Soulful Science* (Princeton University Press) and *The Economics of Enough* (forthcoming)*

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PART THREE • What kind of politics do we want?

THE ETHICAL CORE OF CONSERVATISM

KEY NOTE JESSE NORMAN

With values dating back to Aristotle, conservatism has an enduring social relevance that would strike a natural chord with a new ethics of citizenship

Conservatism in any form is notoriously hard to define, as the career of Benjamin Disraeli illustrates. The young Disraeli opposed social reform, for the sound Conservative reasons that it eroded property rights and local independence while increasing taxation and regulation. The older Disraeli led social reform as prime minister, for the equally sound Conservative reasons that it relieved poverty, squalor and hardship, and promoted social cohesion.

This tension between principles is intrinsic to conservatism itself. Independence, autonomy, freedom, loyalty, responsibility, aspiration, toleration, thrift and compassion are, in different ways, all Conservative values. It is inevitable that they will conflict with each other on occasion. Conservatives accept this conflict, preferring the scope it offers to apply moral judgment in concrete situations rather than obey a foolish and ideological consistency. Indeed, the thought that there can be no absolutely consistent worthwhile ethical theory is a Conservative insight, which has eluded some of the greatest moral philosophers.

If we step back from political thought to philosophy, then, what ultimately distinguishes conservatism from its rival creeds is not so much the views it holds – though some of these are unique to conservatism – as the way it holds them.

Socialism and liberalism are, at root, theories and ideologies – fundamental interpretations of the nature of history and of ‘the good’, from which policy programmes are somehow to be rationally inferred.

Conservatism is no such thing. It is instinctive, not theoretical; a disposition, not a doctrine; realistic and sceptical, not grandiose or utopian; accepting man’s imperfectibility, not restless to overcome it; and seeking to improve the lot of the many not by referring to some plan, but by working with the grain of ‘the crooked timber of humanity’.

In ethics, it does not moralise or preach but works practically from case to case, preferring broad principles to hard-and-fast rules and eschewing the grand sweep

of rationalist theories such as utilitarianism.

Is there, then, a distinctively Conservative ethical tradition? Yes, and it starts with Aristotle’s claim that ‘man is a social animal’. The word for ‘social’ here is politikos, which also means ‘political’. What Aristotle means is that mankind is part of nature, and man’s own nature is to be with others, in a polis or city-state.

This remark may seem banal today, but in fact it is a deep insight. Aristotle writes not merely as a philosopher but as a working scientist, the most revered in the ancient world. By locating man baldly within nature, he directs attention towards what is given, towards the here and now – and so towards a deeper understanding of humans as individuals and as a species. Knowledge is grounded in the study of the actual world as it is. The basic ethical question of how we are to live becomes rooted not in a priori rational reflection, but in an understanding of how we in fact do live.

As social animals, of course, humans grow up in society with each other. They learn to act well or badly, and so character is shaped by context and upbringing. Virtue is thus seen by Aristotle not as inspired by abstract moral universals, but as a disposition shaped by habit and culture and tradition. Change is understood as necessary, organic and gradual, not as innately desirable and disjointed from the past.

We can see the same tension in play at the dawn of the modern political era. Consider Hobbes’s famous ‘state of nature’, in which all are at war with each other, and life is nasty, brutish and short. To avoid this, Hobbes claims, we enter a social contract: a bargain whereby we give up some autonomy to a sovereign power which will maintain order and so protect us from our enemies, domestic and foreign.

This social contract was not a historical event, and is nowhere written down. It is a game-theoretic abstraction from life. The Conservative philosopher Edmund Burke attacks this view.

For Burke, as for Aristotle, man is a social animal. There can thus be no explanatory value to considering a state of nature in which man is somehow to be understood independently of society: man’s natural state is civil society itself.

Where Hobbes deliberately ignores trust, culture and tradition, Burke treats them as constitutive of our humanity. Where Hobbes stresses the primacy of the individual will, Burke stresses the natural reciprocity of rights and duties which occurs within society. ►

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‘Conservatism does not moralise or preach but works practically, preferring broad principles’

◀ Where Hobbes sees freedom as negative, lying in the absence of constraint, Burke lays the ground for freedom as a positive value, as a capacity afforded by society for an individual to flourish. For Burke it is in the very constraining institutions of an ordered society themselves, in the ‘little platoons’, that freedom is to be found.

And it is noteworthy that the philosopher Michael Sandel, who delivered last year’s BBC Reith Lectures and writes in this publication too, first made his name by advancing just the same underlying critique against John Rawls’s famous theory of justice. Like Hobbes, Rawls invites us to enter a thought-experiment: to judge moral issues from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’, in which we do not know in advance what role or status we will have. And like Burke and Aristotle, Sandel questions the starting assumption that pries a person away from society. We are, he insists, intrinsically social animals.

In his Reith Lectures, he extends this view still further. Questions of what we should do in society are unavoidably moral questions, he says. This moral aspect cannot be explained away, as economists and technocrats might desire. But equally, it cannot be reduced to a one-size-fits-all moral calculus. Each question must be analysed on a case-by-case basis. The right ethical approach engages with these difficult issues, but in a spirit of humility: aware of the possibility of failure, and full of respect for what is given in our culture, and for man’s place in the world. It is a very Aristotelian picture. And a very Conservative one.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the treatment of justice. As Disraeli’s career illustrates, a Conservative will naturally feel a conflict of principles here, between respect for the rule of law, and the desire to ensure substantively just outcomes in specific cases. The result may be small acts of mercy, or widespread social reform. But a Conservative will also instinctively avoid the grand but vague claims about social justice which have become so familiar in recent years, and which often leads to social manipulation and undesired outcomes rather than justice itself.

These opposing traditions continue to structure debates even today about conservatism as against liberalism and socialism. But the emphasis falls in a different place in each case. Socialism derives its utopianism and belief in the state ultimately from Plato – and the moral conflict between conservatism and socialism focuses today on the role of the state and its impact on human wellbeing.

But the philosophically deeper conflict is the one we have noted between conservatism and liberalism. For this is a conflict about the nature of human freedom: the precondition for choice, and so for morality itself. The liberal view is arid and technocratic – a game-theoretic view of man as untrammelled will and of freedom as the absence of inhibition. Nothing could be further from the Conservative’s positive moral insistence on man as human animal and on human culture, institutions and capabilities.

Why, then, does all this matter? Why must a ‘new morality of government and citizenship’ draw on this Conservative ethics? A first answer is this: because that ethics is based on values such as respect for others and for tradition, aspiration, and personal freedom and responsibility – values which have been actively undermined in many ways by recent British government.

But a deeper answer would be this: ignoring human beings and human nature is always disastrous for society. The greatest evils of the 20th century – think of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and others – were committed by rulers in the grip of an extreme political or religious or racial theory about society and ‘the good’. And finally, these extremes apart, we can see the same phenomenon closer to home in our flawed public understanding of economics, now dominated by the dogma of neo-liberalism, or ‘market fundamentalism’. This view is widely held in government, in the civil service, in the City and in business. But again it ignores what humans are really like. It sees people as financial atoms cut off from each other, rather than as molecules in a connected society. It regards markets as ends in themselves, rather than as individual institutions morally embedded in society. And the intellectual foundations of this idea lie in liberal rationalism.

But Aristotle was right: men and women are social animals, with all the glorious variety, scope and imperfection which that suggests. They cannot be laid on some Procrustean bed of ideology.

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LIBERALISM: THE KEY TO MORAL RENEWAL

KEY NOTE RICHARD REEVES

Far from making liberal morality a scapegoat for the shortcomings of our political economy, we should be embracing it as the solution to our problems

An electric shock has been administered to our body politic. The near-meltdown of the capital markets combined with a humiliating series of revelations over MPs' expenses has fuelled an inevitable, and welcome, re-consideration of the ethical underpinnings of our political economy. The ancient cities of London and Westminster, twin epicentres of economic and political power, feel as rotten as Rome under Caligula.

Many of the writers in this volume argue that the crises result from the replacement of a political morality of the 'common good' with an 'individualistic', 'atomistic', 'neo-liberal' or 'liberal fundamentalist' view of the world. In the search for culprits, liberals and liberalism have been found guilty, at least by association. But liberal morality, properly understood, is not the problem. It is the solution. Liberals recognise that free societies require and rest upon certain vital moral virtues. They simply insist that these are virtues that cannot be legislated for. As Professor Alan Ryan puts it, liberals want 'volunteers for virtue, not conscripts'.

Liberals are instinctively nervous about invocations of the 'common good', because of fears about who is going to define it. The danger is that the intellectual or political elite imposes their idea of the common good on the rest of society. Some on the political left might argue the common good will be served by a maximum wage, bans on cheap alcohol, or compulsory voting. But there will be plenty of social conservatives insisting that the common good is best served through legal bans on abortion, divorce or gay adoption. Who is to say which version of The Good is the right one? A safer starting point is the liberal principle that people should be free to cultivate their own version of a good life – so long as they do no harm to others.

None of this is to suggest that morality has no place in public life, or in political economy. Quite the opposite: liberal societies and economies rely on social virtues such as honesty, integrity and kindness. But it is to suggest that while institutions can cultivate and

encourage these virtues, it is not possible to legislate for them. Greed is not good. But it is legal.

In the end, each of us must determine our own value system. Of course communities can and do influence people but, as Amartya Sen points out, 'ultimately it is individual valuation on which we have to draw, while recognising the profound interdependence of the valuations of people who interact with each other'.

It is understandable, given the recent political and economic crises, that various shades of communitarian thinking should be fashionable again. And there is much in the work of communitarian writers like Charles Taylor, Alastair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel to admire. But there is no need for a 'communitarian turn' in political thinking. Liberal morality offers a more robust framework for tackling the most important issues facing us. Two examples help to illustrate the point: inequalities in economic power and climate change.

There is widespread anger at the bonuses still doled out in the City, and this has drawn closer attention to levels of economic inequality. The focus of those on the left is typically on income inequality. But from a liberal perspective, the problem of income inequality is less pressing than the problem of wealth inequality. And the recent report by Professor John Hills for the National Equality Panel showed that it is in wealth, rather than income, that the most worrying gaps are to be found. Of course, levels of wealth are closely related to lifetime income levels. But the real injustice is in the way that wealth begets itself, through capital growth and property prices.

For two centuries, liberal political morality has made a sharp distinction between 'earned' and 'unearned income'. Radical liberals were in the vanguard of land tax advocacy in the late 19th and early 20th century. 'Unearned income' from land ownership or inheritance – money that, in John Stuart Mill's phrase, 'falls into the mouths of the rich as they sleep' – should be aggressively taxed. A land value tax should be on the agenda, or at least capital gains tax on principal residences (raising around £6.5 billion a year), as well as a substantial ratcheting-up of inheritance tax. Instead what we have seen in recent years is a deeply unedifying political bidding war between Labour and the Conservatives to reduce inheritance tax. Labour ministers never tire of reminding us that the Tories want to raise the ceiling for IHT to £1 million. They are more coy about the government's decision to raise the ▶

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‘London and Westminster, the twin epicentres of power, feel as rotten as Rome under Caligula’

◀ ceiling (for married couples) from £325,000 to £650,000 – a move which leaves the Treasury at least £1 billion a year worse off.

Wealth, more than income, equals power – and it is the distribution of power that is the most insidious form of inequality. Consumer markets are reasonably good at diffusing power. Labour markets are less so, not least because of the near-monopoly of the joint stock company in terms of corporate governance. What is required is a radical redistribution of power in the economy as well as politics. Liberal economics supports measures such as tax breaks for employee-owned firms, greater powers for shareholders over executives, and much greater democratic control of the now vital global financial institutions.

Admittedly, the themes of employee power and mutual corporate structures have not been as strong in recent liberal thought and politics as they should have been. Politics for so much of the 20th century was seen through the stale dualisms of state v market, or state v individual. Other spaces in which power is exercised, not least within the firm and within capital markets, were neglected.

But markets, like states or families or communities, ought to be judged by their success at giving people power over their own lives. It is one of the great strengths of liberal philosophy that it is agnostic on the futile, tired debates about whether one is pro- or anti-market, pro- or anti-state. If markets give people more freedom and power, they should be welcomed. When they don't, they should not. As the philosopher Jonathan Rée puts it, liberals are in favour of 'free spirits, not free markets'.

Where liberal morality acquires real teeth is when the actions of one person or group harm another. It therefore offers a more robust framework for dealing with the most profound moral challenge of our age, the destructive heating of the planet. Ed Miliband, the secretary of state for energy and climate change, has pointed out that 'the people who are most vulnerable to climate change, the people who will suffer first – indeed are already suffering today – are not in our neighbourhoods, our country, or even our continent.' He went on to say that this necessitates a new 'moral case and politics ... distinct from a direct politics of self-interest.'

Miliband is right. But the moral case can be built on the liberal harm principle. The direct harm caused to others by our polluting activities, the fact that the

harm crosses a border or an ocean does not matter. Harm to others provides sufficient cause for substantial intervention to curb the behaviour in question. Carbon taxes, heavy regulation of emissions, and national road-pricing would all be exemplary cases of liberal morality in action.

At the same time, liberal philosophy is free of the materialism that underpins modern socialism and laissez-faire conservatism. Liberal political economists have seen economic growth as a potential means to the end of human development – but also a possible threat. Mill was the first economist to see a 'stationary state' in economics as a potentially positive goal: 'A stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds cease to be engrossed by the art of getting on.' Eight decades later, John Maynard Keynes, wrote: 'It will be those peoples who can keep alive, and cultivate into a fuller perfection, the art of life itself and do not sell themselves for the means of life, who will be able to enjoy the abundance when it comes'.

Contemporary society is in urgent need of moral renewal – not only because of the deep inequalities in power generated by a broken political system and bankrupt political economy, but because of the profound challenge presented by climate change to received ideas of development and progress. The job cannot be outsourced to philosopher-kings, paid to do our moralizing for us. As creatures of the Enlightenment, we are each moral agents in our own right, with responsibility for our beliefs, actions and relationships. 'It is no longer possible to believe', wrote the radical economist E.F. Schumacher, 'that any political or economic reform, or scientific advance, or technological progress could solve the life-and-death problems of industrial society. They lie too deep, in the heart and soul of every one of us. It is there that the main work of reform has to be done'.

*Richard Reeves is Director of Demos
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POLITICS MUST COME FROM THE PEOPLE

KEY NOTE JON CRUDDAS & JONATHAN RUTHERFORD

In its emphasis on equality, freedom and community, ethical socialism embraces values which, given renewed emphasis, would help to repair broken Britain

The financial crisis has taken Britain to the brink of an abyss. Look down and see reflected the kind of country we have become: dynastic wealth for the few alongside some of the highest levels of poverty and inequality in Europe. More home ownership, but no investment in housing for the next generation and now a chronic shortage of decent homes. Our economy grew on asset bubbles and speculation that lined the pockets of the rich. We live in a consumer wonderland, but low pay and stagnant wages have led to unprecedented amounts of personal debt. And amidst the gilded baubles is a winner-takes-all society at risk from increasing levels of loneliness and mental illness.

The political and business elites embraced free market capitalism like a blind faith. 'There is no alternative' they claimed – and silenced all opposition. Progress was defined in terms of economic efficiency and instrumental competence rather than human wellbeing: school pupils will learn more, nurses will care more efficiently, families will work harder. People were valued by their market success or productive usefulness. Now the crisis has left the elites trapped in the discredited orthodoxies of the past. They were wrong and our democracy and liberties have been diminished. A recent opinion poll reveals that only 13 per cent of us trust politicians. Many have lost hope in politics and have turned toward more personal interests in spirituality, identity and ethical living. But before us lie the threats of a broken and dysfunctional economy, global warming, resource depletion and the end of oil. There are no individual solutions to the problems we face.

We need to rediscover our capacity for collective change, and begin by asking ourselves some fundamental questions. How do we want to live? What kind of society and economy do we want? We believe that the best hope for Britain in the coming decade is a new kind of social democracy that draws on the tradition of ethical socialism and which grows upward from the people. It will be an affirmation of the ordinary every-

day life of our work, our family, love and friendships. In this affirmation we can begin rebuilding the idea of a common good. As the New Liberal and pioneer of ethical socialism, Leonard Hobhouse, wrote, 'Society exists in individuals ... its life is their life, and nothing outside their life.'

Meaning in our lives does not come from buying or selling. It is not measured by the targets we meet or by the amount of money we accumulate. A society organised around these kind of values will founder in nihilism. Our lives are given meaning by our relationships and connections to other people. We only thrive when we experience the feeling of safety and when we have a sense of belonging. We need to know that we are worth being loved, and to know that we have the esteem and respect of others. These are the fundamental needs of human beings around which a society must organise itself.

These values are the lodestar that will guide us into the future. The fact of our living together in the same society requires us to think about justice and to ask questions about who deserves what and what must be shared. As the French socialist Paul Ricouer wrote: 'the unjust man is the one who takes too much in terms of advantages or not enough in terms of burdens'. Equality is the ethical core of justice because individuals are of equal value. It is also the precondition for freedom, not only from the compulsion of others and through a fair distribution of resources, but also a positive freedom toward self-fulfilment. The philosopher Charles Taylor argues that our desire for self-fulfilment has entered deep into our culture. This ethic of self-fulfilment involves the right of everyone to achieve their own unique way of being human: to dispute this right in others is to fail to live within its own terms. Equality and freedom are not opposites, they are brought together by community. We no longer live in communities in which people share the same customs and culture, but the ideal of community remains as powerful as ever, because it is about the mutual nature of human relationships.

The values of ethical socialism are equality, freedom and community. Its politics is shaped by reciprocity - 'do not do to others what you would not like to be done to you' - and guided by pragmatism. Not a pragmatism of 'what works', but one based around the question of what justice fundamentally requires. We need to apply these values to the economy. Britain has to make the transition from casino ►

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‘There is an extraordinary level of political, cultural and community activity in our society’

◀ capitalism to a low carbon, more balanced and ethical economic development. The change demands an economics whose principles are sustainable and productive wealth creation, durability, recycling, cultural inventiveness, equality, and human flourishing. The fundamental logic of this new ethical economy needs to be ecological sustainability. Climate change, peak oil, the need for energy and food security are all core green issues that lie at its heart.

Government should take on a new strategic authority, firstly to regulate the financial sector and to defend society from the damaging aspects of market capitalism, and secondly to act as a dynamic builder of the new green industrial revolution of the future. We will need to strengthen civil society organisations, particularly the trade unions. An ethical economy should be accountable to workers, consumers and citizens through economic democracy and forms of common ownership. Markets need to be re-embedded in society and a reciprocity reestablished in their contractual affairs. The idea of the common good can be extended to the global level and to new forms of global economic and financial governance.

Alongside the productive economy we need to develop a public service of childcare centred on the emotional development of children, and support for parental relationships. Older people need a care system that affords them the same substantive freedoms as others in society. The millions of carers need proper help and financial support. We should recover the principle of universal benefits and social insurance. A decent citizens pension could be connected up to child benefit and the child trust fund and developed into a citizen’s income payable to each individual as a right of citizenship. This would be an unconditional, non-withdrawable income that guarantees access to the necessities of life.

An ethical economy requires a revival of political democracy to bring the state, vested interests and elites to account and to reflect the plural nature of Britain. It would mean introducing proportional representation in local and national elections, a new system of party funding, an elected House of Lords and the revival of local government tax-raising powers in order to deepen and extend democracy through society. These changes will be met by fierce resistance from those who fear popular democracy or fear losing some of their privileges in a fairer society. Our ethical values have formidable enemies, but our strength lies in people

organising together for a better world.

Despite the disillusionment with political parties, there is an extraordinary level of political, cultural and community activity in our society. It has grown out of a diversity of beliefs, lifestyles and localities and it is creating new kinds of organisation that will reconnect people to political power. For example, the Hope not Hate campaign against the fascism of the British National Party has used new internet technology to rapidly build up a database of 100,000 supporters. Young people are joining and leading the emerging climate movement. Like early socialism, they are making politics personal and moral, asking the important questions about the ways we live and what it means to be human.

If this is to be a decade of austerity we can learn from Aristotle, for whom austerity is not an absence of pleasure, but a virtue which is part of friendship and joyfulness. It simply excludes those enjoyments that are destructive of personal relatedness. We will need to share out our resources to create a more equal, inclusive and just society. Social exclusion and loneliness undermine our resilience and self-esteem and increase our fear, anxiety and hostility. And we will need to create new kinds of lifestyles and pleasures, wasting less, and changing the balance from private consumption toward the more sustainable consumption of public goods.

Our ethical life begins in our personal relationships and it extends upward into society and into politics. But in recent years this connection has been broken and the public world of business and politics has lost its ethical dimension. The coming election is the end-game of this old era. Whether Labour remains in government or returns to opposition, there has to be a fundamental reassessment of its identity. Nothing is guaranteed, but the opportunities for a more ethical politics and economy in the decade ahead are real. A new social democracy means a strong, responsive and plural democracy, a restoration of trust in public life, and an ethical and ecologically sustainable economy for social justice and equality. It will be the great challenge of our time, and it will shape the lives of generations to come.

Jon Cruddas is the MP for Dagenham. Jonathan Rutherford is Professor of Cultural Studies at Middlesex University

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TALKING POINTS

A conflict of values

Labour's equalities bill throws into sharp relief the diametrically opposed principles of equality and liberty, says [Julian Glover](#)

In its later years Britain's Labour government has taken refuge from its difficulties by attempting to pass a series of legislative declarations. Hopeful words, mushy ideals, and what Churchill liked to call 'happy thoughts' have replaced substance. Only the heartless, ministers reason, could object to a law banning child poverty, or setting out a right to cancer treatment, or balancing the Treasury's books, or no doubt attempting to extract sunshine from cucumbers. But the most grievous example of this state-sanctioned rubber-stamping of national goals or individual rights promises equality in the name of defending liberty. This one doesn't even work on paper.

Advocates of the bill presumably see it as the ultimate triumph of the progressive state: strong government working in a time of crisis to defend the weak individual. They do not see the contradiction. Equality is not fundamental to liberty. It is its intractable opposite. Labour has wanted to be liberal and collectivist at the same time. But it can only be one of those things. Setting equality as the goal denies, not defends, the importance of individual difference. In effort, or ability or circumstance people will never be alike. In a free society, some must be allowed to fail.

Every politician wants to be thought a liberal these days – even Gordon Brown, addicted though he is to strong monopolies – but only the brave ones admit that a properly liberal society might not always be very nice, or very fair or very equal, but that these things matter less than being free. The word liberal, like progressive, has been spoilt by overuse. Socialists, by borrowing the theory of positive liberty (which emphasises the role of the state) have neglected the much more important definition of liberty as freedom from interference, most often in modern society by the state. Individuals have lost out to so-called communities, which are then given special rights and protection.

The equalities bill takes to extremes the self-contradictory idea that liberty can only be guaranteed by government. It seeks to lasso every characteristic of human diversity – from homosexuality to breast feeding – into one official corral. Freedom is made dependent on state action. Everyone must be made the same in order that they then be permitted to stand apart.

Advocates of the equality bill might counter that they are simply trying to offer everyone basic protection from unfair treatment. They

Q&A

LORD BINGHAM
FORMER SENIOR LAW LORD

Can you describe the ethical framework in which you grew up.

My parents were both doctors. They weren't well off or deeply religious, but they had the highest ethical standards and complete integrity. They would never have resorted to any form of cheating or deceit. They paid their bills by return. My father, employed by a local authority, would never have made a private telephone call from the office or used an office stamp for a private letter. I think I absorbed these values by a process of osmosis, strongly reinforced by my education.

How important are ethics on a day-to-day basis?

As barrister and judge, my professional life has been spent in a strictly ethical environment. There are many things which are generally understood by judges and barristers to be simply not on – that's a feeling most judges and barristers share.

Do others share your outlook?

The main change which I have noticed, and which I deplore, is a general disregard for truth. Dr Johnson said: 'It is more from carelessness about truth than from deliberate lying that there is so much falsehood in the world'. I think carelessness is compounded by spin, propaganda and resort to misleading half-truths. This is not a very recent development, but I find it a very depressing one. If I were the next PM I would put restoration of public trust in the complete truth of official statements high on my agenda. I think a lack of ethical awareness was a major contributor to both the recent financial and political scandals.

What's your personal ethical code?

I would hope that my own philosophy of life is largely coincident with the New Testament, however imperfectly realised in practice.

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◀ could claim that they are enhancing liberty by engineering what British politicians like to call the ‘opportunity society’ and Australians ‘a fair go’. (A recent newspaper poll found 91% of Australians believe this is their country’s defining value). But whatever they achieve, it will certainly not be equality of outcome; that would take a social and economic revolution which no mainstream politician in Britain dares propose, though there is a case for one.

A mix of Marx and the The Manse

Perversely, government’s ambitions for shaping society in this way have expanded over the last 20 years just as its control of the economy has contracted. What economic liberalism gained on the one hand, social liberalism lost on the other. Gordon Brown, before 2008, was content to outsource interest rates to the Bank of England and profit-making to the City of London, but he also moved the Treasury into new areas of social action, most of all by reshaping the benefits system using tax credits to encourage parents into work.

New Labour, in its first decade in power, turned out to be far more interventionist than its 1945-51 predecessor in reshaping society – championing causes such as equality and diversity. But it was a timid mouse when it came to touching wealth and the means of production, the tasks traditional socialists saw as their priority.

One reason was that Marx was unfortunately become mixed up with the Manse. In the 1990s the left lost confidence in its economic strategy and transferred its statist, interventionist enthusiasms to society. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown both drew heavily on their religious morality to set new goals for society, while downplaying the importance of economics. The 2008 crisis suggests that this approach was the wrong way around. Few would deny that the state has found a new and necessary role bailing out banks and priming the economy. Unfortunately this only seems to have given the left greater and unjustified confidence about its ability to shape other aspects of citizens’ lives.

Liberals in the LibDem and Conservative parties – and a handful inside Labour – realise that there is no contradiction between continuing to question the effectiveness of the state across a widening range of human behaviour – and seeing its presence as harmful – even as it appears essential to save the world economy from collapse. David Cameron’s 2009 party conference speech attacking the big state was criticised for first pointing out the weaknesses of government and then praising the NHS, the ultimate example of government action. There was an obvious illogicality. But perhaps it was Cameron’s support for state health, rather than his distrust of government, that will stand out as strange in the long term.

The mechanisms of modern government grow ever more intricate, but the guiding ▶

Q&A

BONNIE GREER
PLAYWRIGHT AND CRITIC

Do ethics play an important role in your life and work?

They certainly do – I was brought up to consider the effects of my actions on others, to make me understand that I don’t act alone. I’m the oldest of seven siblings, so I was always made aware that the others would be watching my behaviour and maybe copying it.

Anyone who was an ethical inspiration?

Martin Luther King. I know his personal life was turbulent, but his public life was exemplary. He took a stand and he did it with intelligence and compassion.

Do others share your ethical perspective?

I think less and less that they do. We live in a celebrity age and more and more people seem to feel the need to be visible, to be singled out. Taking a back seat, letting others go forward, maybe accepting that your own time has passed or that fate has intervened – these viewpoints don’t seem to be acceptable today. Either you’re in front or you’re that most dreaded of individuals – a ‘loser’.

Are today’s children growing up with the ethical framework you’d like?

I’m not a mother, but I think some parents are frightened of their children or are in awe of them or live vicariously through them. Many children today seem to have no childhood – at least not the way I grew up, playing free with no pressure to compete.

We’ve recently experienced financial crisis and political scandal – did either involve ethics or the lack of them?

Because of the rapid

proliferation of our technology – which is growing faster than our ability to cope with it – a kind of managerial mind has risen to the fore, jargon-loaded. Our technology demands tending and there are very few brains capable of getting out ahead of it. The technology creates a kind of homogenisation which creates its own, largely banal, entertainment-based culture. This banalisation creates a ‘let’s go for it’ ethos, very hard to turn back because it’s linked to natural human aggression.

What’s your philosophy of life?

Human life is a continuum. Every action creates its opposite action, whether we are conscious of it or not.

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◀ principles, and ruling dilemmas, stay the same. If you want to make people more equal you will have make them less free to forge ahead of – or fall behind – their fellow-citizens. There is no way round this conundrum, no form of words in an Act of Parliament can resolve it, and we must each of us, in the end, decide which we want: more equality and less liberty; or more liberty and less equality.

Julian Glover is a Guardian columnist

TALKING POINTS

A moral balancing act

Left and right are not just political terms, they represent a split within us all which must not be neglected by politicians, says **Polly Toynbee**

Everyone is for 'fairness'. The winner of the timeless tug-of-war between parties is the one who best captures the spirit of 'fairness' in their time.

Sometimes the centre of gravity pulls leftwards, when voters rebel at grotesque wealth side by side with shaming poverty, the rich child who cannot fail beside the poor child with no chance, greedy bankers beside hospital cleaners not earning enough to keep their family. In political economics that calls for the bigger state and better public services, more taxing of the comfortable to help the unfortunate, lower pay at the top and a higher minimum wage. Redistribution redresses the deformities of the market. The ethical shorthand says: sharing more fairly, we all do better morally and economically. The Nordics are the model.

But after years of a Labour government, the tug pulls in the other direction. 'Fairness' on the right means keeping more of what you earn, the state not reaching too deep into your pocket, bequeathing wealth to your children. Avoid the moral hazards where welfare turns fit people into benefit scroungers. Waste no more on clock-watching jobsworths in the public sector but reward ambition and success in a striving society. State feather-bedding is the road to personal inertia and national ruin. Redistribution is theft from the thrifty to pay for the feckless. The ethical shorthand says: goodness resides in individual endeavour, not to be outsourced to the state. America is the model.

These two moral universes divide not just left and right voters, but represent a split within every individual to some extent. Since we all recognise at least a modicum of truth in each, the tug of war is inside ourselves as well. These are two warring halves of the human psyche and two necessary opposites since we know only too well what an extreme excess of either looks like - the old ▶

Q&A

LORD WINSTON
FERTILITY EXPERT

What's the basis of your ethical framework?

The basis of all our ethics is the sanctity of human life. It's at the root of everything we think of as morality in our world: it's the basis of how we run our society and our existence. Take something like the importance of a day of rest; what that's about is respecting human life, because human beings can't work seven days a week, 12 months a year. They need time to rest. I was raised in a Jewish family and the ethical framework that gave me has stood me in good stead. But of course you don't have to be religious to be ethical, and I'm not sure I am religious. But it might help.

Do you have concerns about the wider ethical climate?

I'm optimistic about the ethical framework I see round me today, and I think a lot of the worries about it are a kind of knee-jerk reaction to events that might look as though they were about ethics, but actually weren't. The notion that MPs' expenses was a national scandal, for example, is nonsense: the fact is, there was a consistent recognition that MPs were not being paid enough money to be MPs. And if you are going to attract the right people you need to pay them properly, so the expenses were a way of getting around being able to pay them more. It's perfectly true that a small number of MPs did act deeply unethically, but that was the exception – if you go back 100 years I'm sure you'd find there were more than just a few MPs acting unethically then as well. So these events were really nothing to do with ethics – they were all to do with management, and that management went pear-shaped. But to say all this

raises deep questions about our ethics ... I think that's wrong. In fact, when you take a longer view of history I think there's plenty of evidence to suggest that as a society we're a lot more aware of ethical issues, and that there are plenty more opportunities for debate. Scientists, for example, take a lot more notice of ethics than they used to do. And look at this very project, for example – it's a sign that ethics are being taken seriously, and that we as a society are taking it seriously.

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◀ USSR or Texas. In an election each side tugs hard.

But in this election, both sides pretend they have plenty of the other's ethical values, blurring the lines more than ever before. New Labour has always bowed to the City, courted business and finance, pretended to be 'relaxed' about the filthy rich and until the eleventh hour, refused to tax them fairly. That pledge to abolish child poverty was stealthily pursued, barely mentioned out loud and, as a result, largely failed – and certainly failed to persuade citizens of its importance. On the other side, Cameron talks loudly about social justice, claims poverty abolition is his aspiration too, points to 'broken Britain', implying he would spend much effort on putting social dysfunction to rights. This ethical cross-dressing leaves the voter to decipher their true moral meanings, obscured in code: the voter is meant to be confused and to believe all things of all parties. The rope has gone slack in the tug of war – or so it can seem until early ethical positioning is translated into hard policy.

The myth of voting

Voting is a profoundly moral matter. Every voter needs to believe they are casting an ethical vote for the good of all: it's not about the wallet but values – even if pollsters show a remarkably convenient synergy between the two, as the rich wards vote Tory and poor wards vote Labour. But both think they are voting for their own ethical vision of social justice. Are they?

No, of course not. There is no mainstream moral thinking or religion-based morality that does not tilt the scales on the side of the poor against the rich – except on the wilder shores of Norman Vincent Peale-originated US evangelism or Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged; hardly mainstream. The poor shall inherit the earth – or at least deserve a fairer share of it – while the rich are trapped in the eye of the needle according to just about every moral philosophy. There are no folk tales, myths or fairy stories, let alone religious holy books where happy endings show heroic and righteous rich people triumphing over poor folk – or only by virtuously redistributing their money to them.

This view of social fairness is hard-wired into the dominant part of the human psyche from the moment a child first says, 'It's not fair'. The first moral thought springs from the evolutionary necessity to share as social animals: as a species we are stronger together. But that clashes with an even more primordial necessity for survival – grab what you can for you and yours. So politicians need to be sure to appeal to both halves of the contradictory human brain – what the religious traditionally mythologise as the internal tug between a pro-social God and a pro-individual Satan.

Politicians neglect either at their peril. The left appeals more loftily to the higher impulse, but loses whenever it forgets to throw something to the lower beast too: many would say New Labour gave away far too much to the old devil. David Cameron

steam-cleaned away the excess of animal nastiness from his party with moral appeals to social justice and green salvation, giving respectable cover for those who would vote for individualism without altogether ignoring the tug of the social. There is the ethical dilemma for both parties – how to pursue their natural bent while nodding just enough towards the other morality. By election day it will be the colour of their money – who pays the tax, who gets the benefit of public spending – that will define the ethical identity of each party.

Polly Toynbee is a columnist for the Guardian

TALKING POINTS

A missed opportunity

Labour's period in office has failed to arrest the spread of Affluenza. Blatcherism became Bratcherism and it's making us ill, argues [Oliver James](#)

There was a time, after 1945, when governments encouraged women and low-income people to reinvent themselves through education. For a time, this led to a highly desirable liberation from traditional roles. Collectivism, in which identity was conferred through gender, class and family position, was replaced by individualism, where identity is achieved through education and career.

This trend occurred to some degree throughout the developed world. But unlike European politicians, ours spewed the American values that 'aspiration' to money and power via education was all anyone should care about. It was a vote-winner – you not only should have higher expectations, they are your entitlement. Cut loose, people looked outwards for a definition of this individual they were supposed to be.

The divorce rate exploded, plateauing in the 1980s, as dissatisfied spouses went in search of The Real Me. The amount of social comparison – Keeping Up With The Joneses – not only increased, it became maladjusted. Misery followed. By 1980, a 25-year-old woman was between three and ten times more likely to be depressed compared with her mother at that age.

But if our ethics were already fragmenting, Thatcherism created an ethical black hole. Never let it be forgotten that it was her Big Bang 1987 deregulation of the City which caused 'the greed is good' values and the ethical, as well as regulatory, deficits which enabled the Credit Crunch. Whether or not she ever said that there is no such thing as society, she certainly acted as if it was so. She destroyed our common goods, even down to school playing fields.

That the flogging of those fields continued ▶

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◀ under Brown's chancellorship and that the economic inequality actually accelerated under Blatcher and Bratcher has been a tragic missed opportunity to reset our ethical compass. Affluenza became our main driver - money, possessions, appearances (physical and social) and fame. Its values are unethical: they encourage only self-absorption and greed.

We now have a government in bed with amoral bankers who feel justified by Selfish Gene ideology (it is often forgotten that Dawkins' book was published in 1976 - it only became a bestseller when it served as a pseudo-scientific justification for Thatcherism in the 1980s). They want us to be Shop Till You Drop, It Could Be You, credit-fuelled consumer junkies, sustaining the growth and aspiration fantasy.

But the solution has always been staring us in the face: be like Denmark, not America. Rock-solid World Health Organisation studies show that mainland western European nations have exactly half as much mental illness as us (11.5% vs 23%). Numerous Eurobarometer surveys prove that they also have far less compromised ethics.

If we had been following mainland European Social Democratic political economics since the 1960s, the so-called broken society (which really means far too Americanised individualism and feminism) would not have happened, nor would Selfish Capitalism have made us sick.

Specific crystal-ball gazing is unlikely to be accurate, but there are some generalizations about the future which seem certain.

At some point, climate change will require that both individual and national economic growth will have to be abandoned as goals in developed nations. Eventually, zero growth will become the accepted global wisdom, ending Affluenza.

How this will be brokered in the developed or developing world is hard to tell. The most benign outcome would be redistribution of wealth and work - a world in which the vast majority do 30 hours a week - with a substantial decrease in material consumption by affluent nations.

Faux democracy

On the political front, predicting the process of transition from the present faux-democracy to something better is impossible. Everything from bloody revolution to bloodless transformation could occur. What is certain is that virtually no one predicted the peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union, any more than the total collapse of the intellectual foundations of neoliberal, Selfish Capitalist ideology: never again can it be seriously maintained that 'the private sector is efficient, the public sector inefficient'. What could be more incompetent than the banks, the stormtroopers of the private sector?

At present, our Ruling Elite spend too much time in each other's company in their multi-million pound Notting Hill, Islington and Cotswolds homes to be able to see beyond neoliberal ▶

Q&A

CLAIRE RAYNER
AUTHOR AND AGONY AUNT

Do others share your ethical code?

A great many do; I'm a vice-president of the British Humanist Association and their membership is high and rising. I also know from many years of being involved with the NHS that it is staffed by a huge number of people who care more for others' welfare than their own pockets.

Do you want to pass your ethics on to a younger generation?

Of course. I'm a parent and a grandparent and know that the best teaching is done by example. I did however teach them one basic life rule; the hoary but still apposite 'Treat others as you would want to be treated yourself'. It covers everything important without being associated with any religious belief system involving threats and promises or other superstitions.

Are children today growing up with the ethical framework that you'd like?

I think each generation finds its own morality. Remember the Peace movement, the Make Love Not War generation? They didn't learn that from their parents, many of whom were horrified by it. I can't deny that I believe Thatcher and her pernicious views about money did affect the young. I remember the grief I felt when my son told me in 1986 that most of his sixth form friends at his school were going straight into jobs in the City. But I have hopes for today's young. The concerns of a large number of them seem to be the welfare of their planet, being decidedly Green in their opinions and activities, and the welfare of its poverty- and catastrophe-stricken residents., than about Lamborghini cars and champagne.

Do you see your ethical values reflected in the world around you?

It depends where I'm looking. In far too many directions I see violent killing wars and all the misery attendant on them - destruction of homes, of families, of communities - and all too often in the name of religion, which I was taught at school was beneficent. But I found out eventually that I had been lied to, after many tearful nights worrying about how God was going to come down and get me and throw me in the fire as my teacher had told me he would. To my mind religion is as it always has been: very maleficent. Lotteries and scratch cards and bingo act as a tax on the poor, and corporate and banking greed is a tax on all of us. These men who get millions of pounds a year never earn it. A person who really works, like a doctor, a teacher, a philosopher, a dustman, a builder's mate - they're the people who really earn the money they're paid.

If you had one issue to put at the top of the next prime minister's agenda what would it be?

Improvement in the quality of care we give old people in their homes and in the NHS. The generation who lived through the depressions of the thirties, the war of the forties, the austerity and swingeing taxes of the fifties and beyond and general neglect ever since, deserve it.

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PART THREE • What kind of politics do we want?

◀ solutions: they are Thatcher's children. But they will be unable to prevent massive change. At some point, whether it takes five or 30 years, climate change makes a new economics absolutely inevitable, whether achieved suddenly or gradually.

Only self-deluded, greedy, Americanised ideologists seriously believed that neoliberalism had wrought the end of history. They had lost sight of the fact that our instinct to cooperate is every bit as great as our drive to act selfishly. Let us hope that this cooperativeness is what ultimately dictates our futures.

Oliver James is the author of Affluenza, The Selfish Capitalist and Britain on the Couch. For more Oliver James see fishcapitalist.com

TALKING POINTS

Ethical policymaking

Values are needed to make the thorny decisions necessary to deal with the public debt, argues [Carey Oppenheim](#)

Politicians have recently been wary of using ethics to frame their intentions – Robin Cook's ethical foreign policy was quickly lost in the realpolitik of international negotiations despite his later courageous resignation in the run up to the Iraq war. The imperatives that drive policy from the sheer pace of events – 24-hour media coverage, the need to act decisively to effect change and to build coalitions with uncomfortable bedfellows – so often appear to doom an ethical framework to failure.

Twelve years ago, Labour came to power committed to evidence-based policymaking, to bringing outside experts into the heart of the civil service and to trying out innovative forms of consultation and debate. These were novel and creative attempts to conduct the business of government in a different way and to blow the cobwebs out of Whitehall. But on the back of the fracturing of the neo-liberal economic consensus, the severe blow to democratic politics and the profound concerns about the conduct of policy making, most notably in relation to Iraq, we find ourselves rudderless. It is hardly surprising that we are in search of a deeper foundation for both the manner and the substance of our politics and policymaking.

So what might an ethical approach to policymaking consist of?

First, we need to argue for policies from first principles. Politicians have been strangely shy of talking about values. Instead they have been more comfortable with the language of evidence and 'what works'. Of course, this is not to eschew ▶

Q&A

MARTIN ROWSON
CARTOONIST

Do ethics play an important role in your life and work? If so, can you explain how?

Whenever people start talking about ethics or morality, I get suspicious. My immediate thought was of a cartoon I did years ago of Tony Blair, his teeth replaced by missiles, grinning widely and saying 'ETHICS!', with a note below announcing that he was, in fact, saying 'Essex' but was having trouble with his new teeth. Nonetheless, I have a clear set of largely unstated rules, which you might call ethical, or just common decency. As a satirist, they include only attacking people because of what they think, not because of what they are, and only attacking people more powerful than me.

Did you grow up with a strong ethical background?

It was largely unstated, so I seem to have absorbed it without noticing, almost by osmosis. One of the most important, and highly ethical, things my father ever said to me was: 'Never obey orders, including this one.'

Do you think others share your ethical perspective, do you think they should?

I hope so. If there is an ethical basis to my life and work, it's basically about do as little harm as possible to the people, and applying the same principle by attacking, satirically, those who don't.

Are you passing on or have you tried to pass on your ethical understanding to a younger generation?

I hope our children got the point when we failed to tolerate their grosser acts of selfishness. They seem to have turned out okay.

Do you think children are growing up with the ethical framework you would like?

I fear many children are inheriting the same obsessions with personal status their parents have been encouraged to aspire to over the past thirty years, which has resulted in the yawning chasms in equality of income and treatment which is blighting our whole society.

Do you see your ethical values reflected in the world around you?

Here and there, obviously. But not at the top.

If you had the chance to put one issue of ethical importance at the top of the next prime minister's agenda, what would it be?
Equality.

We have recently experienced financial crisis and political scandal, did either involve ethics or the lack of them?

Obviously. Again it's all about the abandonment of a kind of fundamental human ethics, which entails considering everyone else around you as well as yourself, rather than the kind of ethical autism typified by our economic system

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PART THREE • What kind of politics do we want?

◀ evidence; far better that it informs our policies (and there are some excellent examples from Sure Start, the smoking ban, the statutory minimum wage). But how we read evidence is inevitably shaped by norms, judgements, values. Too often, policy has been driven by responding to each piece of the jigsaw rather than the bigger picture. The recent Family Green Paper is an illustration of this – it fails to connect with the big issues facing families today because it quickly dissolves into a list of worthy but relatively micro initiatives.

Second, our consumerist approach to politics is deeply inadequate. It leads to people believing that the job of politicians is to satisfy all their wants, that there are no trade-offs or choices to be made. Yet we know that, unsurprisingly, people want mutually incompatible things – better public services and lower taxes, children protected, but the state off their backs, more local control but no variation in services between areas. We are at the start of an election campaign that will barely touch on the thorny decisions that lie ahead about how and at what pace we should contain the public debt and who should bear the cost. Without recourse to explicit values and priorities, it is very difficult to chart a course through these choices. But engaging people in those trade-offs and options lies at the heart of what politics and policy should be about.

What kind of ethics?

So an ethical policy is about being prepared to stand for something, rather than simply accommodating policy to public opinion. Labour's ambivalence about leading a debate on poverty and inequality, despite it actively redistributing income, could be argued to have inadvertently led to harsher public attitudes to poorer families. Anxiety about public perceptions has repeatedly stymied action across the political spectrum on the growing prison population, in spite of the incontrovertible evidence that prisons are disastrous at rehabilitation. We assume that politics can only mirror public opinion rather than shape it. By contrast, Labour was much braver in other areas – responding to and leading the public on homosexuality and civil partnerships, driving a sea-change in attitudes. This is not to argue for ignoring public perceptions and insights but to encourage politicians to be shapers, to try and win arguments based on ethical positions.

But what kind of ethics?

The craving for an ethical basis to politics stems from the fact that the prevailing values of this past era have left out some essential elements of what it is to be part of a good society. The neo-liberal market model (albeit modified by a commitment to social justice) dominated both our political values and the matrix for policymaking. It neglected the impact that family relationships, friendship, community and reciprocal bonds have on identity, agency, opportunity and well-being. It squeezed out a proper understanding of the relationship between sustainability and our economy and way of life.

The task for progressives is to re-engage with their rich ethical heritage – whether that is co-operatives, faith, the role of voluntarism, social enterprise – as well as the familiar tools of state action for achieving change. There is no single tradition on which to draw, but the task is rather to integrate different insights from this wide source of alternative ethical frameworks to start putting together the new scaffolding that will guide policy thinking as we look towards 2020.

This is not a call for a naive approach to policymaking, inevitably ideas are shaped by the cut and thrust of practical politics. But the art of the possible rarely animates people and very often is born out of a fear of alternatives. A politics based on fear is almost always regressive or defensive. Instead, a positive view of human nature and belief that people are essentially hopeful provides a stronger foundation for ethical politics. So when a politician – like Obama most recently – offers up a vision for a different future and people are prepared to rally around it, even if they know that the reality will be a lot more messy, it has huge potential to galvanise progressive change. If an ethical framework for policy is about arguing from values and insisting that a deeper democratic engagement is intrinsic to policy making, then it has the potential to enrich our politics and re-ignite trust in our politicians.

Carey Oppenheim is Co-Director of the Institute for Public Policy Research. She would like to thank Ed Cox, Lisa Harker, Professor Michael Kenny and Guy Lodge for their comments in preparing this piece

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PART FOUR • Building a life in common

THE POWER OF COMPASSION

KEY NOTE CAMILA BATMANGHELIDJH

The inspiring story of one child reveals that ethics begins with moral courage, for it is only then that goodness can finally prevail

Julie was eight years old when I first came across her as a psychotherapist. She used to come into the therapy room resolutely silent, refusing to disclose anything about her life at home. I had a sense of her profound hunger as she touched every toy and pressed the dolls into her face in intense embrace, dreading the end of the session.

Suddenly she disappeared. The school couldn't find her. Four years later, when I founded Kids Company, a children's charity, I heard a ferocious twelve-year-old screaming at the gate. It was Julie. She was now the carer of her three younger siblings, all aged below nine. Her mum and dad did drugs and crime. The children looked hungry, gaunt, dishevelled, and yet Julie was glowing beneath the dirt.

They hadn't been in school since she'd disappeared, aged eight. Within a month of being with us, her father was imprisoned, leaving her crack and heroin-addicted mum without the drugs she needed. She forced Julie into prostitution, pimping her to facilitate her addiction. Julie hid food, so that she could feed her younger siblings. At times her mother would turn the cooker hob on and place her child's hand on the ring to force disclosure of the food hideouts. Then she would sit in front of her children, and consume whilst they looked on, hungry for nourishment and her love. At night, Julie would gather her siblings and shelter them in her bed, whilst drug dealers squirted blood onto the walls.

One day the police raided the house. Her favourite dog jumped to protect her, and they blew his brains out with shotguns in front of the kids.

Despite it all, Julie remained resilient and devoted to her siblings. The outside world looked at her sarcastically, hurling derogatory remarks as her little family scavenged in bins and shoplifted for biscuits. 'Feral' and 'scum' justified putting up mosquito alarms, the high-pitched shriek of which could only be heard by children, forcing them to flee shopping centres.

She became sore in heart and body, but could

never raise the alarm. Sometimes the hunger of her siblings used to enrage her and she would pick up the phone to social services. On the odd occasion when a social worker visited with advance warning, the mother borrowed food from the neighbours and faked a sarcastic laugh as she produced the fridge contents, evidencing Julie's 'lies'.

Eventually, after a year and a half of Kids Company's relentless advocacy, the three siblings were taken into care. Julie was left, negotiating the traumas of her devastated childhood. But here's the rub.

Ten years later she is inspirational. She looks out for the vulnerable children on her estate. She fights for them with breath-taking thoughtfulness. Born into such moral corruption, the product of a profoundly perverse childhood, how did she get to be so ethically extraordinary? How come the change? And more importantly, what did Julie know from such a young age that all of us could learn from?

I think Julie discovered something very precious in life. She understood, early on, that she needed to diminish her own sense of importance to forgo her own needs, so that the needs of her younger siblings could be met. The kinder she became, the more energy she accessed. The reward of seeing how potent her compassion was enabled Julie to rise above the victim position her abusers endeavoured to trap her in. As much as she was harmed, physically and emotionally, they could never corrupt her because Julie operated through higher principles of humanity. Some people call it 'ethics', I'm not talking about religion or rituals, but referring to the essence of what is important.

I don't want to romanticise her story. Lack of maternal love and the blows from her parents' fists have left Julie with challenges. She is often hyper-agitated, struggling to calm herself down. When the bank clerk tells her that she has no money she breaks down and sobs uncontrollably, like a child who's been hurled back into the catastrophic burden of having no food to feed her siblings. Sometimes her sleep is invaded by the sordid memories of the sexual assaults she has tolerated. She wakes up with a painful headache, thinking that it's the moment the brick cracked open her head as she refused to please the punter. From her childhood she has inherited pain.

But the ethical human being has a need for meaning in order to sustain a sense of aspiration. He or she will outgrow the meaning of achievement and status, and if an extra dimension is not available, the spirit can drop catastrophically into the abyss of 'I've

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PART FOUR • Building a life in common

‘The ethical human being has a need for meaning in order to sustain a sense of aspiration’

◀ done it all, so what?’ Julie could have said, ‘Life’s not worth living, what’s the point?’ She could have become cruel in revenge for the harm she had experienced; she could have run away and saved herself rather than endure torture on behalf of her siblings. She could have taken her own life, feeling the darkness was too unbearable. Instead, she aspired towards life. Something made it worth living. It gave her courage, afforded her resilience, made her feisty, channelled her rage and helped her more than ‘survive’.

I believe the capacity to be ethical becomes accessible to human beings when they shed their consumerist skin, when they peel away the layers of defensive achievement: hurrying to get degrees, promotions, titles and money. When you shed this luggage and visit the basics, you become at one with the intuitive laws through which all things alive are organised. The individual is part of the whole and the whole is in the individual. At this point of fusion with the greatness beyond ‘I’, the little people get a glimpse of the essence of all important things. Jung called them archetypes, the peeled-away fundamentals of life.

Traumatised children often have a unique access into this spiritual dimension. It’s usually because they precociously realise the insignificance of all those deceits we gather to delude ourselves into thinking we are too important, too powerful to be harmed or not ‘chosen’. The abused child experiences a painful fear: human life is not that worthwhile. That’s why grownups get to abuse, and those who can don’t step in to protect. It takes courage to sustain living when you know intrinsically the fragility of being a person. Julie knew at any point she could be pinned beneath an abuser and not escape. She knew how catastrophic her smallness would continue to be.

However she also discovered the space where the rottenness of abusive behaviour could not reach her. The beautiful, elevated, and aspirational space she discovered was a by-product of her ability to express compassion. Once she saw that, she could see a place where laws operate which are beyond the mediocrity of human mistakes.

She didn’t need to worry about being weak or powerless, her understanding of potency, her sense of agency, and her power to fight came from knowing that she could access the unrelenting love which came from just being kind. It’s not a bargain or an exchange, the more you love, the kinder you are, the closer you get to being with something profound and energising. It’s

embodying an expression of the spiritual.

I think that’s why Julie glowed beneath the dirt. And despite it.

As politicians become preoccupied with the domain of ‘character’ in the service of achievement, the advice industries mobilise to make a fortune, regurgitating recipe books on ‘how to bring up an ethical child’. From ‘toddler taming’ to ‘raising happy children’, parents are assaulted with advice. Governments set up parenting institutes and endeavour to incentivise ‘good parenting’ through tax breaks. They are self-righteous nails sealing the coffin of guilt as we are buried by confusion, boredom and advice-toxicity. Despite the cajoling, disturbance seeps through the ‘political skin’, reminding us that there is something rotten, driving our children to torture other children, our teenagers to stab each other and terrorists to blow us all up.

Government has to have the courage to act catalytically. To genuinely care for the vulnerable without agenda, without vote-seeking, just for the love of accessing good. This will begin the process of healing, helping the nation re-balance its ‘emotional economy’. The human condition is only meaningful in the expression of love and care for another. Julie knew how to get out of her hell. There is so much we could all learn from her: the eight-year-old who knew what no book can teach, no lecture can deliver and this article fails to capture. She knew something that politicians can’t capture in a policy but they can gain wisdom from her and, with it, lead.

Camila Batmanghelidjh is the founder and Director of Kids Company, and author of Shattered Lives: Children living with Courage and Dignity (Jessica Kingsley)

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PART FOUR • Building a life in common

THE WINNER TAKES IT ALL

KEY NOTE LIBBY BROOKS

The narratives of popular culture tell us that happiness and success are in our grasp if only we try hard enough, but this is a damaging myth of exceptionalism

Early educational psychologists cautioned parents against allowing their offspring to day-dream, concerned that such aimless mental maundering could result in neurosis. Not so Piers Morgan, no Piaget but nonetheless an expert in the semantics of contemporary culture. Hosting *I Dreamed a Dream: The Susan Boyle Story*, a musical extravaganza charting the singer's journey from obscurity to global recognition over the past year, Morgan returned again and again to a thesis increasingly presented as popular fact: that Boyle had dreamed her dream and realised it, and that if it was possible for her then it was possible for anyone.

No matter that the song from *Les Miserables* which first drew international attention to Boyle on Britain's *Got Talent* is actually a lament about the cruel thwarting of hope, sung by a dying prostitute, abandoned by her lover and estranged from her only child. In Susan Boyle's trajectory is crystallised one of the most compelling ethical narratives of popular culture: that ambition for mass validation and the baubles it brings is a human duty and that, being in possession of such certainty, fulfilment and success will inevitably follow. It is both a peculiarly British distortion of the American Dream and the inevitable moral consequence of consumerism. If you want something badly enough, it can be yours. And if you fail, the fault is yours alone.

Talent shows have long offered contestants the opportunity to triumph over their tragedies, and Boyle's inadequacies were all too apparent to her audience, if not to herself. A self-professed virgin in her late forties, she was unemployed and living alone with a cat named Pebbles. Un-styled, un-pretty, and un-versed in the conventions of age-appropriate feminine behaviour, she wiggled her hips in sexual parody during her first televised appearance as the judges looked on pursed-lipped with disgust and the crowd roared their derision. Then she sang and everything changed. In the next round, when she gyrated in the direction of "Piersy-baby", Morgan congratulated her on providing a beacon of cheer in a world benighted by recession.

Some might contend that the recognition that a woman of less than conventionally attractive demeanour could still charm dealt a blow to cynical judgment by appearance. I doubt it. Physical perfectability, and one's individual responsibility to achieve it, remains another entrenched value of contemporary culture. From supermodel Kate Moss's sun-seared wrinkles 'exposed' in *Heat* magazine, to footballer Cristiano Ronaldo's sculpted abdominals in the latest Armani underwear campaign, both women and men are informed that, while they may not have time, energy or organisation to change the world, it is beholden upon them to change themselves. The language of positive collective action is co-opted for frantic personal primping: because we're worth it.

And this connects to a more profound cultural elevation of youth at the expense of age and difference of experience. Harry Potter to Topshop, via Coldplay, teenagers and adults are now reading the same books, wearing the same clothes and listening to the same music. Far from offering an experience of counter-culture before submission to the constraints of adult responsibility, the market-generated cult of youth is sold as accessible to anyone, provided they can afford the latest model of mobile phone, and the common denominator for all is conspicuous consumption.

What the SuBo phenomenon did achieve was to remind the public of the delight of collective participation in popular culture. As any ethic of community ebbed away on the streets, in the living room togetherness could still be found vicariously in the fictional friends of soap opera and regular television dramas. But lately, with the advent of play-on-demand and Sky Plus, this fantasy bonding has itself evaporated. We have become atomised even in our TV viewing, used to the instant gratification and personalisation that technology affords us. It is these Saturday night talent shows, whether of the civilian or celebrity variety, which allow us to experience once more the social adhesive of event television. While the rest of the schedules, with their preponderance of violent murder mysteries and police procedurals, do their best to convince that any sense of community beyond the flickering friend in the corner has been killed stone dead.

But in one crucial aspect, Susan Boyle's success contradicts that central narrative of possibility. For all her suggested tragedies, Boyle's triumph was to be in possession of an extraordinary voice. It was talent ►

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PART FOUR • Building a life in common

‘Not everyone is blessed with a gift. Nor is it everybody’s moral duty to have one’

◀ that catapulted her to fame. But the nurture of ability cannot be a cure-all for unhappiness, inequality or imperfection for the simple reason that not everyone is blessed with such a gift. Nor is it everybody’s moral duty to have one. This is the myth of exceptionalism – the notion that through talent, determination and luck, anyone can trounce their born circumstances. But, just as the silent parenthesis of the National Lottery’s ‘It could be you’ slogan is ‘it most likely won’t be’, there are one in a million Susan Boyles or Billy Elliots. Far more common are those the sociologist Christopher Jenks described as the ‘unexceptional disadvantaged’ – the ones who can’t sing or dance their way up and out of the cycle of deprivation. The talent show as modern meritocracy doesn’t work.

This doesn’t serve to unravel the narrative entirely. According to the reality discourse, anything is possible not only by way of talent but on account of simple likeability – or lack of it. All that is required is an understanding that you can only achieve true value through public notoriety, and that such notoriety, however brief, will always be worth more than a lifetime of obscurity.

This ethic is best evinced in the story of Jade Goody, perhaps the closest popular culture has come to a perfect parable of our times. This 27-year-old Big Brother star died last March after succumbing to the cervical cancer that had ravaged her body following its late diagnosis. Goody, reviled for her stupidity, crassness and weight gain on the original show, then later condemned for her playground racist bullying of a Bollywood actress on the celebrity version of the series, found a strange sort of redemption through her illness.

Goody clearly stated her desire to ‘die in the public eye’, and the media circus took her at her word. For some, it was the apotheosis of the Diana effect, a further damning erasure of the boundary between public interest and private tragedy, and a confirmation of lack of consequence in the most intimate revelations, so long as they satisfied the venal public appetite. But, in a society which has few established rituals left for facing death and its aftermath, and that struggles to know how to respond to others’ grief, she also showed that the process can be as much about grand sentimental gestures as it is stoicism and quietly closed doors. There is an anxiety that popular culture renders nothing sacred, but Goody showed that the limelighting of pain and despair had its own particular value.

It is doubtful whether Goody’s death would have

been considered so tragic had she not been a mother. Hers was a final narrative of maternal sacrifice, or exploitation as some contended – selling the media rights to her hasty wedding in order to make as much money as possible to bequeath her two boys. In less heightened circumstances, the popular ethic around motherhood is vexed, trading a fetish for baby bumps and newborns with an essentially conservative critique of alleged career women. The status of mothers is at once lauded and diminished by the ambivalent have-it-all rhetoric of the Sunday supplements.

Before her dubious redemption, Goody’s tale refracted another crucial facet of contemporary culture – how the celebrity echelon fits into a class system that remains, despite denials, rigidly stratified. Before her ultimate acceptance as an end-of-the-pier Everywoman, Jade was dismissed as a tasteless chav. The prominence of this new celebrity class has in one way fooled ordinary people into accepting inequality thanks to the trope that we ought all to be able to achieve our heart’s desire. Yet, at the same time, even in the case of inconsiderable riches, restraint remains a virtue, and those whose wealth elevates them beyond their born status are no better than they ought to be.

Perhaps this explains why Katie Price, whose personal franchise now extends far beyond her glamour incarnation Jordan, is treated with such suspicion. On the recent series of I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here, she was voted to undertake no less than seven foul, bug-related tasks and was so traumatised by the public loathing inferred that she left the programme.

Price is considered to signal the nadir of the reality ethic, because of her single-minded pursuit of hard cash without even a patina of confected artistic integrity or desire for public approval. She is an entrepreneur, pure and simple, and her product is herself.

There is some evidence, though, that the tide may be turning on this culture of mass participation and singular recognition. Over the Christmas period, demand for celebrity biographies significantly waned. And publishers have been struck by the unexpected success of Jennifer Worth’s *Call the Midwife*, a memoir of her working life in London’s East End in the 1950s. If the market for reading about admirable, but hitherto unrecognised, lives is flourishing, perhaps it is only a matter of time before popular culture reflects value beyond the narrow ethic of notoriety.

Libby Brooks is Deputy Comment Editor at the Guardian. She is the author of The Story of Childhood: Growing Up in Modern Britain (Bloomsbury)

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TALKING POINTS

The cult of freedom

The BBC's handling of the Andrew Sachs affair shows how vacuous the debate on the limits of artistic expression has become, argues **Nigel Biggar**

The Ross/Brand affair is a cultural icon. When BBC producers approved the broadcasting of two highly rewarded stars leaving obscene messages on the answering machine of a septuagenarian actor, a window opened onto the moral speechlessness that cramps too many of our public institutions. A storm of public complaint erupted. One BBC director defended Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand as 'brilliant entertainers'. Other media types muttered grandly about standing up for freedom of speech against the mob and its agitator, the Daily Mail. In the end Brand resigned, Ross was suspended, and the Director-General, Mark Thompson, declared the broadcast a 'gross lapse of taste'.

Still, the lingering impression was that the BBC had buckled only after enough people had made enough noise. And the impression was confirmed some months later when Mark Thompson explained the Corporation's decision in terms of balancing the right to artistic expression against avoiding offence.

This response is telling, for it shows how political and market considerations have thoroughly gagged moral ones. The meaning of 'offence' here can't have been the moral one of an objective injury to human dignity — say, a racist slur or homophobic abuse. For that is strictly off-limits. It can't be 'balanced' against other claims like artistic expression. What must have been meant was 'offence' in the subjective, amoral sense of feeling irritated. Since other people might deserve to be irritated, this kind of offence could be justified.

But could it be justified by appealing to artistic expression? Enter another distinction, between a legal right and a moral one. Morally speaking, no one has the right to say just what he or she pleases, however legal it may be; no one has the right to be gratuitously abusive to someone else.

It belongs to modern artists' flattering self-understanding that they exist to play prophet against convention, and so have the right to shock. From this, many make the adolescent inference that whatever shocks is right. Which doesn't follow. In a liberal society we have a legal right to express views that others may find shocking. But, morally speaking, shocking should never be our purpose. Our only purpose should be to tell the truth as we see it.

So Ross and Brand had no moral right to do as they did. The broadcast may have been 'edgy', ▶

Q&A

KWAME KWEI-ARMAH
ACTOR AND PLAYWRIGHT

What are your ethical terms of reference?

I'm a person of faith, and that faith is primarily Christian – I'd call myself an afro-centric Christian. So the obvious conclusion is that my ethics come from my Christian upbringing, augmented by my left-wing politics. But in fact I've been very careful not to frame my ethics through the lens of a particular religion. In a nutshell, I want to look out for others, and I want to treat others as I'd like to be treated myself.

How much are ethical considerations part of your daily life?

Right now I'm writing a play for the National Theatre based on events in 1982 when the US invaded Grenada. And the project is crammed with ethical considerations – a major one is, from whose perspective am I telling this story? Telling the truth is a major consideration for me as a dramatist: often I'm writing about issues in the black community, and I have to think very seriously about the fact that I need to construct a version of the truth that will be honourable to all who are involved in it.

What was your take on the MPs' expenses saga, and the banking crisis?

I've got a rather unfashionable view on all this, which is that I think we get the government, and the systems, that we deserve. I totally agree with the condemnation of greed that these events threw up, but I think it would be hypocritical not to acknowledge that we have all participated in it. How many of us thought there was a problem with how easy it was to get a mortgage? And didn't we all play our part

in enjoying cheap credit – I know I did. So how come it was just the bankers who were scapegoated? We have to see these events as a mirror to ourselves. My job as a dramatist is to do exactly the same thing, to put up a mirror to society and to say, do you like what you see? And if not, what are you going to do about it? So the thing we need to ask now is: what do these events, in banking and at Westminster, reflect back to us? And if we think they need action, what is that action going to look like?

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◀ it may have delighted the younger section of the audience market, but it was an offence against human dignity perpetrated in the name of a morally vacuous understanding of what an artist is about.

On this reading, Mark Thompson should have said that no right to artistic expression could justify the gratuitous public humiliation that Ross and Brand heaped on Andrew Sachs. He should have said that it was morally wrong. But he didn't. Instead, he described it as a lapse of current taste, and implied that the BBC had decided that the need to avoid giving offence had trumped artistic right. But what kind of calculus could possibly have produced this decision, except the political and market one that the costs of annoying so many people were too high.

The logic of this kind of amoral thinking takes us to scary places. At the moment, we are fortunate that majority opinion in the UK is against racist views. This hasn't always been the case, and we can't be sure that it always will be — especially if we find ourselves under serious pressure from economic migrants or in the aftermath of the terrorist explosion of a dirty bomb. Suppose that laws against the public expression of racist sentiment were repealed. The line of thinking that silences moral considerations in decisions about what to broadcast could lead the BBC to start broadcasting racist material on the grounds that it would please a significant market, and that the offended feelings of a despised minority could safely be ignored.

Don't mistake the problem. It's not the BBC. It's the liberal orthodoxy that reduces public morality to observing legal rights. Provided an individual doesn't violate the rights of others, he's free to do as he pleases. We might find his exercise of autonomy tasteless but we're bound to tolerate it. Ross and Brand broke no law. Nor did most MPs in exploiting parliamentary expenses to their private advantage. Nor did bankers in accepting vast bonuses from institutions kept afloat by taxpayers rendered jobless by their recklessness.

The redeeming feature of recent scandals – in the BBC, in parliament, and in the City – is that they reveal the moral poverty of rights and autonomy. They expose the need to untie our tongues in talking about responsibility, obligation and integrity. The gratuitous humiliation of others, or the brazen repudiation of responsibility for them, might not break the law. But it violates what we owe human beings — and TV producers, newspaper editors, football club managers and shareholders should have the courage to say so.

In short, our liberalism desperately needs to break the spell of the easy cult of freedom and recover its original, harder devotion to human dignity.

Nigel Biggar is Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Christ Church, Oxford and works with John Lloyd on 'Journalism and Public Responsibility'

Q&A

DAN SNOW
HISTORIAN

What was the ethical framework around you, growing up?

I grew up with a very strong ethical code, and it came from my parents and my grandparents. They weren't and aren't religious people – they're agnostics or atheists – but it was every bit as fundamental a basis to our lives as anything religious. We were brought up basically to treat others as you'd want to be treated yourself. Both my parents are journalists, and fairness is absolutely fundamental to both of them: they were also scrupulously honest – I remember that if either of them even brushed against another car in the car park, they'd always put a note under the windscreen. They also despised snobbery, both social and intellectual, and I like to think I emulate them in all these things.

Do others share your outlook?

I think it's a complete fallacy that Christianity has any sort of monopoly on ethics. If you travel the world, as I've been lucky enough to do, what you quickly realise is that all world faiths share the same basic attitude towards morality. It's all obvious stuff – don't kill people, don't steal from people, be faithful to one another. So I do think that most people share my ethics, because I think they're fundamental to how we survive on this planet.

Do you ever meet anyone with a totally different outlook?

I guess I sometimes do, especially in America – they tend to be very right-wing Republicans, and they believe in a Hobbesian view of society. They think it's ok not to pay taxes, and they don't accept the legitimacy of the government. But I do accept the legitimacy of the government of this

country, where I live – if I lived in some other places I might not, but here I do. So I accept that the statutes here are legally binding, and I keep to the rules.

What was your take on the saga over MPs' expenses?

I think human beings will behave as the system and the value-system allows – so over MPs' expenses I don't think it was the MPs as much as the system that was wrong. A few MPs behaved deeply unethically over expenses, but most were just doing what the system allowed and expected. So it was a system failure more than a widespread failure of ethics. The same is true of the banking crisis, by and large: it was the system that was at fault, although a few unscrupulous individuals did take advantage of it to an outrageous degree.

Because I've studied history, especially military history, I feel very strongly about leadership, and especially that old-fashioned notions of leadership are very sound ones. The military leaders who most impress me are the ones who led from the front, who went down with their ships, who didn't shrink from their responsibility to share the fate of those they were in charge of. That's strong ethics, and it impresses me.

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TALKING POINTS

Going global

How do we foster a harmonious development of the sense of belonging and the spirit of human solidarity, asks Bhikhu Parekh

Some fundamental facts characterise human beings. We share basic capacities and needs, flourish under similar conditions, and belong to a common species. We are also members of and deeply shaped by particular ethnic, religious and political communities, identify with these in varying degrees, and develop a sense of belonging to them. The aspect of common humanity gives us a universal sense; the aspect of political and cultural identity, a particularist orientation. The dialectic of the two is played out differently in different societies and historical epochs, though in our age globalisation profoundly structures both and sets the framework of their interaction.

Thanks to globalisation, all societies are being locked in a system of interdependence: events in the remote mountains of Afghanistan affect the lives of the citizens of New York. All societies face common problems, such as climate change, the movement of footloose capital and people, spread of disease and terrorism, and these require common solutions. Global market forces acquire a momentum of their own and reduce humans to helpless victims unless the latter act collectively and charter them in the service of their common well-being. Globalisation calls for the politics of human solidarity, raising a new set of ethical challenges.

It questions the ethnic, cultural, political and other identities which people use to make Earth their home, and which provide our moral and emotional anchors. Exposed to the constant flow of new influences and changing circumstances, these identities get blurred and lack stability. Since human beings need a firm sense of belonging, this can make them feel rootless and homeless, and cause ethical and political panic. People cannot feel at ease with the reality of globalisation and meet its challenges unless they are morally and emotionally secure in an environment they can call their own. To be human in our globalising world is to learn to see ourselves as members of both particular communities and the wider human community. The life of a rootless cosmopolitan who is in exile everywhere is as impoverished and untenable as that of one imprisoned within an aggressively guarded communal home. The momentous task facing us is how to foster a harmonious development of the sense of belonging and the spirit of human solidarity.

Democratic politics is one of the most effective ways to create a stable and vibrant community

with a global orientation. It involves empowering citizens, giving them a sense of control over their collective affairs, fostering common interests and affections, and bringing them together through their participation in a shared pursuit of common concerns. Citizens also need to recognise that they are part of – and their interests are bound up with – those of the wider human community. And this raises an ethical challenge that is perhaps not so familiar: putting ourselves in the shoes of others, seeing them as human beings with similar aspirations and needs, feeling their pains and sorrows, recognising them as sources of moral claims, and learning to care about and for them. Although large sections of humanity are beginning to think and act on this, as is evident in the way they respond to stories of human suffering in distant lands, they are poorly served by their political, economic and other institutions. Corporate and oligarchic interests control the economy and exercise unhealthy influence over our political institutions. The latter are centralised, secretive, resistant to assertions of democratic control, and deflect legitimate popular anger and critical scrutiny by whipping up false fears about non-existent or easily manageable internal and external enemies. For forty years the communists were cast in that role; now it is the turn of the terrorists, extended to cover all Muslims, and that should enable governments to suppress movements for democratic renewal for another forty years.

All this calls for a radical redefinition of governmental and other institutions and the character of people who run them. While the free market has much to be said for it, it must serve the common good and be subjected to appropriate regulatory controls. Our political institutions should facilitate the formation of enlightened public opinion and give it a valued role in determining public policy.

Britain has long prided itself on the quality of its political life. The web of deceit with which Tony Blair led Britain into Bush's war on Iraq and the virtual absence of sanctions on him show how mistaken this view is. A less partisan, more critical parliament, a less supine cabinet, ministers and MPs with a greater sense of honour and judgment, a more probing media, greater transparency in the way intelligence is assessed, etc, could have saved thousands of lives and spared us an indelible and massive stain on our national conscience.

In classical Rome political leaders found guilty of gross misjudgment were required to withdraw from public life. This was not only a form of punishment but also a way of cleaning up the miasma of dishonour they had left behind. Maybe we could learn something from this valuable practice.

Bhikhu Parekh is Emeritus Professor of Political Philosophy at the Universities of Hull and Westminster. His books include A New Politics of Identity (Palgrave Macmillan)

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TALKING POINTS

Neighbourly bonds

Those around us have become strangers, but three key principles could help us to restore our lost sense of community, says Ash Amin

In days gone, when people lived in settled communities for most of their lives and identified strongly with the locality, neighbours knew each other and were expected to behave in certain ways – if not in a friendly manner or through reciprocal exchanges of one sort or another, then as part of a world with many familiarities and ties. They served to mediate local animosities and disputes. Neighbouring was a way of life and a compulsion, a habit for most; a reason perhaps to leave for some; an ordeal for the stranger and outsider.

Today, people live next to each other largely as strangers, in places that hardly hold together as communities of common fate or interest, without much contact with each other, often moving on to live elsewhere. Individuals have real-time and intimate contact with people and things far away, and so dwell in disparate and often physically distant worlds of affiliation and feeling. The upshot is that neighbours or strangers who find themselves in the same space can afford to ignore each other; they avoid being inquisitive except in suspicious and hostile ways; they up sticks when necessary. The neighbour is just the person next door and neighbouring is no longer a required art of living.

Mutual avoidance

Should we leave things as they are, and let neighbouring become an art of self-protection, mutual avoidance, skirting around trouble? The danger in this is to court isolationist or punitive ways of living with difference. It turns neighbourhoods into zones of discipline and surveillance. It makes us wary of the Muslim, the beggar, the welfare scrounger, the dissident, the immigrant, the one who does not fit. The logical extension of this culture is that the neighbourhood ceases to be a place of peaceful coexistence among strangers and becomes instead one of fear and suspicion of the other.

The crucial question is whether attempts to bridge the differences between people will work. I have my doubts, given that people's attachments, particularly in cities, just are not local anymore. Engineering for local contact might yield more intimacy, but it might do the opposite. Attempts to ensure that a neighbourhood houses people with similar values and interests seem heavy-handed – though it is what gated communities achieve, by default.

However, an ethic of good neighbouring that draws on positive sensibilities of living among strangers offers more promise. There are three such sensibilities that could help to yield better neighbourly relations, each working on feelings of attachment rather than obligations to others.

The first we might call a sensibility of respectful distance. Immediate neighbours who share a dividing wall, a garden fence, a common entrance should learn not to expect too much from each other. Instead, they should keep the peace, understanding that neighbours share a fragile dividing line. Such a politeness of the party wall or privet hedge can be nourished by many small things: respectful greetings, taking in the mail for each other, keeping the noise down, agreeing on common repairs.

Protecting our patch

The second sensibility has to do with local care. Bad relations are pushed to the margins when people in a neighbourhood feel strongly about the local patch, coming together from time to time to protect it. This is what happens when volunteers do something about cleaning up public spaces, making streets safe, setting up local amenities for children, youths, elderly people, and more. Through these acts, people learn to take responsibility for their neighbourhood, an ethic that may even turn into care for one's neighbours. Of course many are the residents who will not play ball. The challenge, therefore, lies in finding imaginative ways of cultivating interest in the local commons among the uninterested, perhaps through projects that capture the imagination or ventures that involve fun.

The third sensibility is attentiveness to the aesthetic of place. This speaks to the difference between feeling negative about a rundown neighbourhood, and feeling generally satisfied in one that is cared for. Architects, planners and social reformers have long understood the impact on civic behaviour of good design, green spaces, busy streets, functioning services, low-key surveillance, well-kept houses, and human-scale development. The aesthetic of a place comes with no clear affective guarantees – otherwise we could not explain why slums can yield feelings of solidarity, and pristine suburbs strong feelings of aversion and indifference. Chances are, however, that in a decent neighbourhood with plentiful signs of social life in public space, neighbourly relations might turn for the better. Then, a new alchemy of living with difference might be catalysed, one where neighbours start seeing each other as part of a community.

Ash Amin is Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Durham

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TALKING POINTS

Who belongs?

How a state reconciles the needs of refugees – economic and political – with those of its citizens is the toughest ethical test, writes **Nicholas Sagovsky**

We are all ‘political animals’. We all need to belong to a community, with its associated politics. The compact cities of the ancient world have transmuted into the diverse nation-states of the contemporary world, but some things have not changed. Political engagement can be dangerous: those who have been most politically active sometimes have most need to flee. The person who has no nation-state to protect them lacks one of the fundamental conditions for human flourishing.

One major challenge for any citizen-based ethics must be how it views the non-citizen. After the second world war, the world was in shock from what had happened when a modern nation-state used sophisticated technology to turn on its own citizens, declaring the Jews to be uncitizens who should be exterminated (‘To each his own,’ said the sign over Buchenwald in a terrible parody of the definition of justice as ‘rendering to each their due’). International citizen ethics failed when those Jews who looked to other states for protection were so often turned away. In 1948, the United Nations agreed that ‘never again’ could this happen. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights laid the foundation for a series of international instruments of human rights. The UK signed up to the Refugee Convention (1951) and the Protocol (1967) whereby anyone with a ‘well-founded fear of persecution’ can claim asylum in another state – not within a quota of refugees, but as a human right. Our shared ethic, as citizens, demanded this recognition of universal human need.

This right has become ever harder to defend. Ours is world where inequalities of wealth, security and opportunity are staggering. There is a huge premium for anyone from the poorer countries who can become economically active in Britain. With cheap air travel, migration becomes logistically ever easier, and with access to images of the good life in the wealthy west, an ever more attractive option for the world’s poor. Hence the growing numbers of people on the move: people fleeing from poverty, warfare and environmental disaster; people trying by any means to get access to work and opportunity in the rich countries of the west.

The ways in which a state treats those who look to it for asylum are an index of its commitment to common humanity. The wealthy nations have the difficult task of distinguishing between economic migrants who make it to their shores and those

in need of continuing protection. Migration in search of a better life has been a huge factor in human development. Migrants have contributed immeasurably to the growth of the British economy, and the growth of economies back home. It makes sense, however, for the state, in the light of its own needs, to control immigration. Asylum seekers (historically, by far the smaller group) need asylum immediately. Distinguishing between asylum seekers and economic migrants is far from easy as poverty and persecution so often go hand in hand, and there are those who, if they are returned, will be punished simply for having sought asylum.

Asylum seekers fall ‘between two states’. In normal circumstances, citizens can rely on states to protect them. The person whose claim for asylum is being determined (sometimes over years) cannot do that. They are in a liminal space in which ‘citizen ethics’ are put to the test. The need of the individual is protection, but what are the needs of the city? To defend itself against the threat of terrorism? To stand firm against people-traffickers (which may mean standing firm against the trafficked)? To restrict immigration to a level which does not threaten social cohesion? To defend the right to asylum as a basic human right? Do citizen ethics ensure a universal ‘bottom line’ standard of protection for all who inhabit the city? Not if you’re an asylum seeker. Since human beings need a firm sense of belonging, this can make them feel rootless and homeless, and cause ethical and political panic.

There is a serious economic cost, in a time of public spending cuts, to maintaining an asylum system which is ‘fit for purpose’; and a moral cost to not doing so. The way these conflicts are handled provides a litmus test of citizen ethics. The most practical and public demonstration of the state’s commitment to an international standard of citizenship would be the de-politicisation of the agency that tests asylum claims. The UK Border Agency has this huge responsibility – but its first task is to protect our borders. Its stance is defensive, and getting more so with increasing fears of terrorism and international crime. The protection of the vulnerable is well down its list of priorities.

In the ancient world, citizen ethics applied only to citizens. What about the vulnerable outsider today? Are we, as ‘ethical citizens’, prepared to be judged by the way we treat the person who turns to us in their hour of need?

Nicholas Sagovsky is Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey. He was a commissioner on the Independent Asylum Commission and his books include Christian Tradition and the Practice of Justice (SPCK)

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AFTERWORD

The ethical is political

ADAM LENT

Politics on both the left and right were once driven by competing accounts of human flourishing. Our challenge is to remake our own visions for today, and to debate them

Ask most people what ethics means and they will almost certainly reply that it is about obeying rules or 'being good'. If this pamphlet has any positive effect, it will surely be to leave the reader with the sense that ethics is about much more than that. Every contribution here makes clear that ethics are most meaningful when they are rooted in a vision of human flourishing. Being ethical may not be easy, but when we are we should end up pushing at the limits of our potential.

This link between ethics and flourishing once provided the foundations of our main strands of political belief.

For the right, human flourishing came about through the ethical practice of taking responsibility for one's own life by working hard and using God-given capacities and talents to find a role for oneself in the marketplace. Beyond the economic, humans could also flourish as duty-bound members of their faith, their family and their nation. This route through life may not always have been easy but self-sufficient humans who accepted their duties to the wider community would always flourish more than those who relied on others for support or shirked their responsibilities.

The left's vision linked ethics and flourishing with equal clarity. It was an ethic of ►

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AFTERWORD

‘The irony of contemporary individualism is that it wants everyone to be the same’

◀ solidarity and commitment to one’s fellow humans and one’s class. It was only by working with and on behalf of each other, and sometimes making sacrifices, that we could achieve our potential and flourish as workers, learners, pleasure-seekers, families. The alternative was the material and spiritual poverty of exploitation. It was an ethic fundamentally bound up with struggle against those who would deny our flourishing in favour of a life of drudgery and ignorance. We combined in solidarity not just because it made us better people but also because it made us strong against those who would exploit us.

These outlooks are now only found in their unadulterated form on the margins of British politics. The conditions that sustained these perspectives have been wiped away by the rapid shift from an economy built around the structures of a manufacturing-dominated capitalism to one shaped by services.

No vision of equal profundity has replaced those outlooks. Notions of human flourishing and ethics may still inform our mainstream political discourse on occasion but in such a de-racinated, sotto voce fashion as to be barely perceptible. The deeper, richer, noisier and more challenging notions of ethics and flourishing that once characterised British politics have given way to consensual rhetoric about equality of opportunity, rights and responsibilities, and fairness.

But as our politicians have evacuated the territory of ethics and flourishing, a new force has moved in to fill the vacuum: the shaping and fulfilling of preferences in ways that benefit business. Flourishing is no longer linked to ethical behaviours. Instead flourishing has become increasingly about material accumulation, fulfilling sensory pleasures, achieving high status and working as hard as necessary to make the money to do these things. In short, the cacophony of popular culture, advertising, the mass media and peer pressure tells us endlessly to submit to the individualism, hedonism and

materialism that serves a consumer-led economy so well. The contributions to this pamphlet have outlined in various ways the problems this rising culture of acquisitive individualism has caused in terms of stress, mental illness, troubled family life, a splintered public realm, weakened democracy and economic crisis.

None of this is to say we must return to the old perspectives. Faith, family, nation, class, and community are forms which have taken on such profound aspects of ambiguity and fragmentation, they cannot simply be resuscitated. The problem is not that the old linkages between ethics and flourishing faded. The problem is that nothing new has replaced them. But after the economic calamity we have just suffered, the time is ripe to start developing new perspectives which can resonate in a very different world to the one that existed 50 years ago.

A start can be made somewhere surprising – in the work of John Stuart Mill. Mill is, of course, the sage of individualism and might seem the worst place to look for help. But a close reading of his most influential work, *On Liberty*, reveals that Mill was not so much a proponent of individualism but of individuality. The distinction may seem obscure but it is critical.

Individualism of the sort that has come to be central to contemporary life is a totalising concept. It wants us to believe that material accumulation and sensory pleasure is the only way to live, the only route to true flourishing. Individuality, as conceived by Mill, has no such totalising aspect. For Mill, the benefit of escaping from the predations of the state and wider society is that you can choose to live how you want. The irony of contemporary individualism (as opposed to individuality) is that it wants everyone to be the same.

From Mill’s perspective, the worry of our current situation is that the shallow individualism that has grown up in the last 30 years has closed down not just the mental alternatives to this life but, more tellingly, the real-world alterna- ▶

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AFTERWORD

‘The deeper, richer, noisier notions of ethics that once characterised politics have fallen away’

◀ tives that make individual choice meaningful and possible. The easily accessible mutual bank; the local independent shop; the intellectually demanding television documentary; the large public company that puts stakeholders rather than shareholders first; the cinema that shows more than the latest blockbusters; the cheap and cheerful housing option; the derelict land turned over to common use rather than for ‘executive’ apartments: these losses are a tragedy from the Mill perspective.

The obvious question is: what has this got to do with ethics? This is where an insightful passage in *On Liberty* is worthy of full quotation.

‘He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgement to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and - when he has decided - firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision.’

For Mill, flourishing through ethics resides in the virtues we must practice if we are to achieve true individuality: careful observation, reasoned reflection, vitality, wisdom, commitment, determination and temperance.

Here is a different perspective on ethics and human flourishing and one that strikes right at the heart of the shallow reality of the individualist view. Individuality is about using my power of reflection to choose the life I want, free of an all-powerful market which tells me that I am only fulfilled if I work too hard in a job in order to buy the car, the house, the clothes, the gadgets, the holidays, the food that everyone else would like to buy had they the money.

However, perhaps one of the most striking things about this placing of individuality at the heart of our sense of ethics and flourishing is the way it unexpectedly makes us focus on the wellbeing of others. In the narrow individualist schema, I could, in theory, live a life of material

excess and high status surrounded by slaves. But I can never really be an individual – in Mill’s sense – in a world of drones. The free choices I make require the options of distinct ways of life. But such options are only ever provided by others making equally reflective choices and by working to create the lives they prefer and which may also attract me.

The problem is that the virtues of individuality do not spring easily from the untutored soul. As the great ethical philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has shown, an impoverished intellectual and social context will lead to an impoverished ethical life. The right upbringing is vital, but then so are high levels of education, material security and healthcare. And these are things that we can only provide as a society together. The irony is, therefore, that to flourish as an individual, I need to help sustain a certain level of collective provision.

It may be then that the greatest ethical challenge facing politics today is to identify the correct level at which to set this degree of collective provision in order to promote genuine individuality. And, of course, the state has a role to play in striking the complex balance between the aspects of market capitalism that sponsor diversity and individuality and those that ultimately encourage a shallow individualism.

If our politicians had the courage, imagination and originality to have those debates in those terms, there may then be some hope for the revival of a discourse which, once again, places competing visions of ethics and flourishing at the heart of public life.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

RESOURCES

ORGANISATIONS

To follow up on the issues discussed in this booklet, and sign up if you feel strongly about the ethical crisis, visit Citizen Ethics at www.citizenethics.org.uk.

The School of Life is a social enterprise exploring how to live through innovative classes, weekends and other events. TSOL will host a Sunday Sermon on ethics given by Baroness Mary Warnock on 28 March 2010. www.theschooloflife.com

Common Purpose is a not-for-profit organisation that links people from a wide range of backgrounds to help them become more effective leaders in civil society. www.commonpurpose.org.uk

Citizens UK facilitates the broad-based union of local civil society groups to effect democratic, positive change through campaigning and action. www.cof.org.uk

Essential Education is an initiative, working at the grassroots, that fosters the capacity of people to be kind and wise, and thereby contribute to peace in the world. www.essential-education.org

Life2, a new progressive organisation helping people to live happier, wiser and more meaningful lives within the complexity and pressure of the modern world. www.lifesquared.org.uk

BOOKS

CAMILA BATMANGHELIDJH
Shattered Lives: Children who live with courage and dignity (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006) Drawing on 20 years of work with children, Batmanghelidjh explores the lives of those who have been affected by trauma, abuse and neglect.

PHILLIP BLOND
Red Tory: How Left and Right have broken Britain and how we can fix it (Faber and Faber, 2010) David Cameron's 'philosopher king' explores the benefits of radical conservatism.

ALAIN DE BOTTON
The Consolations of Philosophy (Penguin, 2001) The philosopher of the everyday asks what the philosophers have to say to us about life. *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (Hamish Hamilton, 2009) A rich exploration of people's working lives and what we seek from work.

LIBBY BROOKS
The Story of Childhood: Growing up in modern Britain (Bloomsbury, 2006) An attempt to understand the childhood of today through the eyes of nine very different young people.

MADELEINE BUNTING
Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling our Lives (Harper Collins, 2004) Bunting paints a scathing picture of the overwork culture fostered by many employers.

JOHN COTTINGHAM
The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value (CUP, 2005) The philosopher shows how

all the resources at our disposal can be integrated to sustain moral growth.

DIANE COYLE
The Soulful Science: What economists really do and why it matters (Princeton University Press, 2007) Economist Coyle provides a tour of the most exciting new economic thinking, and explains how important this is to our society and lives.

SUE GERHARDT
The Selfish Society (Simon and Schuster, 2010) The psychotherapist argues that the way we raise children, and the value we place upon child carers, is crucial for a better society.

CHARLES GUIGNON
On Being Authentic (Routledge, 2004) Looking at how the idea of authenticity is related to that of ethics, also providing an accessible introduction to the ideas of philosopher Charles Taylor.

WILL HUTTON
Them and Us To to be published by Little, Brown in autumn 2010.

OLIVER JAMES
Affluenza (Vermilion, 2007) In a tour of cities of the world, psychologist James seeks to discover why the pursuit of wealth is increasing anxiety and ruining our emotional immune system.

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE
After Virtue (Gerald Duckworth, 2007) The now classic text in which the distinguished philosopher relaunched the debate about virtue ethics.

MARY MIDGLEY
Beast and Man: The roots of human nature (Routledge, 2002) The philosopher draws from the animal kingdom to learn lessons about human beings, including their ethical nature.

JOHN MILBANK, LUKE BRETHERTON & ANGUS RITCHIE
Crunch Time: A Call to Action (Contextual Theology Centre, 2010) A discussion of Christian responses to the recession.

JESSE NORMAN & JANAN GANESH
Compassionate Conservatism (Policy Exchange, 2006) Norman and Ganesh argue that conservatism can be grounded in trust and empathy.

MARTHA NUSSBAUM
Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (Princeton University Press, 2010) The distinguished philosopher shows how a liberal education should be aimed at educating global citizens.

KIERAN O'HARA
Trust: From Socrates to Spin (Icon Books, 2004) An examination of how trust has changed in an era of large institutions and human interaction on a global scale.

BHIKHU PAREKH
A New Politics of Identity: Political principles for an interdependent world (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) A major thinker on multiculturalism asks how we embrace diverse ethnicities at the same time as cultivating a broader, human solidarity.

TARIQ RAMADAN
Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation (Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2009) Oxford academic Ramadan lays out a new way of conducting Islamic scholarship and discusses the implications of this for Muslim society.

RICHARD REEVES
John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand (Overlook Press, 2008) Reeves rediscovers one of the most radical reformists of the Victorian era, whose thought continues to challenge us today.

MICHAEL SANDEL
Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do (Allen Lane, 2009) The Harvard political philosopher sheds light on a number of contested issues in our civic life.

AMARTYA SEN
The Idea of Justice (Allen Lane, 2009) The economist and philosopher argues that the abstract search for concepts of justice can distract us from immediate problems.

RICHARD SENNETT
The Corrosion of Character: Personal Consequences of Work (W W Norton & Co) Sociologist Sennett offers a critique of the 'flexible' work culture.

ANTHONY SHELDON
Trust: How We Lost It and How to Get it Back (Biteback, 2009) An examination of civic society across ten areas of national life.

EDWARD SKIDELSKY
The Return of Goodness (Prospect magazine, 28 September 2008) Skidelsky argues for a renewed conception of the good life based on virtue theory. www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2008/09/thereturnofgoodness/

ROBERT SKIDELSKY
The Return of the Master (Allen Lane, 2009) The leading expert on John Maynard Keynes explores the economist's thought and significance for today.

POLLY TOYNBEE & DAVID WALKER
Unjust Rewards: Exposing Greed and Inequality in Britain Today (Granta Books, 2008) Toynbee and Walker paint a disturbing picture of Britain's failure to overcome severe inequality.

MARK VERNON
The Meaning of Friendship (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) An examination of the love called friendship, and the role it plays in relationships from the workplace to civic society. *Wellbeing (The Art of Living series)* (Acumen Publishing, 2008) Vernon explores how we so often go wrong when looking for happiness, drawing on insights from Aristotle to Mill.

BERNARD WILLIAMS
Morality: An Introduction to Ethics (CUP, 1972) A seminal, accessible work of ethics by one of the leading philosophers of the late twentieth century.

ROWAN WILLIAMS
Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 2000) The Archbishop of Canterbury voices concern over the absence of certain modes of self-understanding in contemporary culture.

With thanks to Ian Bhullar for help in compiling this list.

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