The return of goodness

by Edward Skidelsky

Contemporary liberalism's insistence that morality is a mere matter of rights and obligations empties life of its ethical meaning. We need a return to the virtue ethics of the pre-moderns, and a renewed conception of the good life

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Morality is once again on the lips of politicians and commentators. David Cameron has warned that we are "becoming quite literally a de-moralised society, where nobody will tell the truth any more about what is good and bad." He is echoed by Richard Reeves, new director of Demos, who argued in last month's Prospect that Britain's poor lack not only the material but also the moral resources to better their lot in life.

Behind these comments lies a flickering recognition that our nation's central problems are moral, not economic. But any deeper reflection runs up against a principle entrenched in the liberal mind--that individuals are sovereign in their own sphere, and that only when someone infringes on others may he be rebuked or punished. "Neither one person, nor any number of persons," declared John Stuart Mill, the originator of this principle, "is warranted in saying to another human creature of ripe years, that he shall not do with his life for his own benefit what he chooses to do with it."

Mill's principle has come to shape western public doctrine. It lies behind the social legislation of the 1960s and the anti-discriminatory legislation of the past four decades. Neither left nor right dares reject it openly. Yet in historical terms, it is an anomaly, a departure from the common sense of our species.

The ethical traditions of the pre-modern world focused on those qualities of character making for a good and happy life--the virtues. The exact nature of these virtues was open to dispute. The ancient Greeks singled out courage, temperance, prudence and justice. Christians added faith, hope and charity to the list, and downgraded pride (for the pagans a virtue) to a vice. Other virtues have had a more temporary vogue. The Renaissance favoured boldness, the Puritans thrift and industry. The east has traditions of its own. Confucius stressed filial piety, Lao Tse spontaneity. But all agreed that the virtues--some virtues--must lie at the heart of the moral life.

The virtues, for these pre-modern traditions, are the natural excellences of the species. They are to us what speed is to the leopard or strength to the lion; they are not matters of choice or self-expression. This is not to say that they develop unaided. They require years of training--you cannot possess the virtue of gratitude unless you have first been taught your Ps and Qs. And this training does not end with childhood. Throughout life, the virtues can be encouraged, if not compelled, through legal

arrangements designed to minimise temptation. Law is part of morality, and not, as in Friedrich Hayek's metaphor, a set of traffic rules for avoiding collisions. The state is an association of people come together to lead the good life, and not a night watchman or boundary patrolman.

These various pre-modern traditions, eastern and western, represent a style of thinking about ethics that has become almost unintelligible to us. Under the influence of Mill and others, we have come to think of morality as a system of rights and obligations, and the philosophical problem as one of defining these rights and obligations. But where there is no right or obligation, morality is silent. A man who, having fulfilled his obligations to others, settles down with a six-pack to watch porn on television all day may be foolish, disgusting, vulgar and so forth, but he is not strictly speaking immoral. For he is, as the saying goes, "within his rights."

Virtue clearly has no place in morality so conceived, for virtue is what calls forth love and admiration, not what may be demanded. Unlike obligation, virtue is never "fulfilled"; it suffuses the whole of life. This explains much that seems to us bizarre in pre-modern ethical systems. Take the sin of gluttony, analysed by medieval scholastics into the five vices of eating praepropere, nimis, ardenter, laute and studiose (too quickly, too much, too keenly, extravagantly and fussily). This strikes us today as insultingly intrusive. Surely if someone eats quickly or fussily, that is his business. It may be bad for his health, and bad manners, but it has nothing to do with morality.

Or take again the two classical virtues of prudence and temperance. We do not think of these as moral qualities, but as useful skills or habits. And what about courage? We might describe this as a contingently moral quality, in that it can help a person fulfil his obligations to others, but not, surely, as an essentially moral quality. For courage can be exercised in a self-regarding fashion, or indeed wickedly (a "brave, bad man" was how Cromwell was described by his contemporary Lord Clarendon). In fact, of the four classical Greek virtues listed earlier, only justice appears to modern eyes an unambiguously moral quality, for only justice is concerned essentially with rights and obligations. The characteristically modern tendency is, then, to reduce the whole of morality to justice, leaving the rest a matter of sensibility and taste.

But the pre-modern traditions remain alive under the surface. We cannot but admire feats of courage and self-denial; we cannot but feel disgusted by greed and sloth. Nor are such reactions merely snobbish or aesthetic; they are closely connected to the more strictly moral reactions of respect and indignation. Yet our public language forbids us to acknowledge this connection, forcing us to disguise what are at root ethical responses as something altogether different. For instance, hostility to smoking--clearly at heart a moral aversion to intemperance--must masquerade as a concern for public health or the rights of innocent third parties. Hence the stress placed on the (spurious) concept of passive smoking.

But surely, a liberal might respond, there is no real opposition between liberty and virtue. On the contrary, true virtue as opposed to mechanical obedience, flourishes only under liberty. "The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling... and even moral preference," writes Mill, "are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice." This argument has been used to justify every increase in personal liberty over the last 50 years. "Give us more choice," we clamour, "and we will become rounder, more self-directed, happier people." How often was that cry heard in the 1960s, and again (with a more materialistic inflection) in the 1980s?

Yet it hasn't happened like that. Modern Britain, for all its profusion of choice, is hardly a showcase of fully developed personalities. Why not? Mill's error was to think of morality in atomistic terms. His vision--a trimmed-down, Anglicised version of German romanticism--was of a row of suburban gardens, separated by fences, within which little Goethes could air their individuality. But that is a travesty. Morality is embodied in language, and language is social. By enshrining individual

choice, liberalism has eroded the public language of morality, leaving nothing but a set of rules for frictionless co-existence. The romantic ideal of self-development has collapsed into mere consumerism. Far from rising upwards, we are sinking slowly downwards.

Moral language in Britain today bears out this diagnosis. The old idiom of the virtues ("honourable," "gentlemanly," "indecent") has been replaced by the neutralised jargon of the social services ("challenged," "vulnerable," "inappropriate," "disadvantaged"). Such moral language as does survive is crude and bullying. It consists of what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has called "fragments"--disconnected shards of a once coherent tradition. Words such as "evil," "perverted" and "racist" have lost any exact meaning they once had and now serve simply to mesmerise and coerce. We have become a nation of relativists on the one side and ranters on the other. What has vanished is the cool, exact appraisal of conduct we find in, say, the sermons of Bishop Butler, or the novels of Jane Austen.

Let me give a concrete example. Big Brother is now in its eighth year. It panders to the greed and vanity of its participants and to the voyeurism of its viewers. It encourages scheming, backbiting and infidelity. It brings out the worst in everyone. Yet from a liberal standpoint, there is nothing to be said against it. The participants are there of their own accord and may leave any time they please. They are, to use Mill's words, "doing with their life for their own benefit what they choose to do with it." Who are we to criticise them? Big Brother illustrates, then, the way in which the liberal focus on rights shuts off a whole dimension of moral thought and feeling. On some level we know that it is vile, yet we lack the authority and words to say so. Hence the tone of evasive irony with which we (superior, educated people) greet such phenomena of popular culture.

So what is to be done? The problem is an intractable one, for what has to be revived is not just certain behaviours but a whole tradition of thinking and speaking. The main bearer of such a tradition was the church, yet the church, with its claim to authority over minds and souls, has fallen foul of the dogma of individual sovereignty. It is now faced with the choice of either accommodating itself to liberal norms, thereby losing its distinctive voice, or else resisting them, thereby banishing itself to the cultural margins. Secular ethical traditions have fared little better. The code of the gentleman, that peculiarly English amalgam of morality and snobbery, could not long survive the coming of mass democracy. Marxism and other leftist movements, a source of hope and courage to many, have been swept away by the tides of global capitalism, along with their support base in the industrial working class.

The erosion of these languages, sacred and secular, explains the proliferation of targets and guidelines that has overwhelmed the public sector. Targets are an attempt to codify the uncodifiable, to substitute bureaucratic directives for professional honour and wisdom. Their implacable logic denies hospital beds to the sick and swells academic journals with unreadable articles. Yet the main damage they do is to the self-respect of those who must implement them. There is no surer way of destroying public spirit than to deny its existence. Those treated as jobsworths will become jobsworths.

The failure of material incentives has led to the introduction, in the same managerial spirit, of what might be called moral incentives. An example is the policy, launched in 2005, of "naming and shaming" young offenders. Shaming, with its covert appeal to spite, was always the least appetising aspect of the old ethical system. Yet what previously gave it a point was the existence of a moral language with some purchase on both those being shamed and those doing the shaming. The former were told that they had done something wrong, something of which they ought to feel ashamed, and the latter that they were sinners too, so should temper anger with forgiveness. But in the absence of such a language, "shaming" is simply the unleashing of a vindictive mob on a stubbornly unshameable individual. Our politicians have yet to realise that morality is not a box of tools to be deployed at will on particular social problems. It is interwoven with the life of a community; it waxes and wanes together with that life.

A similar instrumentalism runs through Richard Reeves's Prospect essay. Reeves seems at first to be reiterating in the language of contemporary social science a point evident to all thinking people since Aristotle--that the family is the nursery of character. But he is in fact saying something new and sinister. Families, for him, are character "factories"--instruments of centrally defined goals, to be remoulded if they fail to achieve those goals. "Compelling failing mothers and fathers to attend parenting classes is not in itself illiberal," says Reeves--an odd reflection from the biographer of John Stuart Mill.

The problem is that Reeves, like most contemporary intellectuals, is a product of disciplines so far removed from the tradition of the virtues that they can recapture its insights only in a skewed and mechanistic fashion. Economics is a case in point. An offspring of moral philosophy, it remained for thinkers as late as John Maynard Keynes a handmaiden of the good life. Today, however, it defines itself simply as the science of choice under conditions of scarcity. Its practitioners are debarred from talking about morality, save as an instrument of growth, as "moral capital." Nor can they talk about happiness, except by attaching a number to it--an absurdity known as "happiness economics."

Philosophy presents a more hopeful prospect. Amid its ever-multiplying sub-disciplines lurks a movement dedicated to understanding morality in terms of the virtues. Contemporary virtue ethics, as it is called, developed in Oxford in opposition to AJ Ayer's so-called "boo-hurrah" theory--the theory that moral judgements are nothing but expressions of emotion. To call a man "brave" or "sneaky" is not just to express an emotion, it protested, but to say something definite about his character, something that can be true or false. It is only a reductively scientist conception of "the facts" that prevents us from acknowledging such judgements as factual. Reflections like these tilted a generation of Oxford philosophers--Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch among them--away from the fashionable ethics of choice and towards the realism of Plato, Aristotle and the medieval scholastics.

Virtue ethics breathed new life into moral philosophy. It saved it from dryness and brought it into contact with theology, literature and history. (It is no coincidence that most of its pioneers were women--rare oases of emotional depth in the chappish atmosphere of postwar Oxford.) Yet the influence of virtue ethics on the so-called "real world" has been nil. Here the movement has been if anything in the opposite direction, with guidelines and targets gobbling up what used to be the province of decency and common sense. Virtue ethics has thus turned into yet another academic game, subtle and irrelevant. Unwilling to press its insights to the point where they come into conflict with the prevailing political order, it has retreated into its own little garden.

One figure stands out as an exception. Alasdair MacIntyre has always insisted that the language of the virtues has meaning only in the context of a common way of life, and is thus in tension with liberalism--a political system subversive of all common ways of life. MacIntyre's diagnosis of the problem has remained essentially the same over 50 years; what has changed is his solution. His early work, written under the influence of Marxism, look to politics for deliverance. But in his 1981 classic, After Virtue, he accepts Max Weber's thesis that all revolutions must end up captive to bureaucracy. Our only hope lies in a withdrawal from the political stage, in a new monasticism. "What matters at this stage," concludes MacIntyre in prophetic vein, "is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us... We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another--doubtless very different--St Benedict."

MacIntyre does not elaborate. We are left to guess what form a new St Benedict might take. No doubt he would not be an

orthodox Christian. The old faith was framed for a world of poverty; it does not speak to the dilemmas of affluence. But a new faith is emerging that may yet do so. One small example can be found at Tinker's Bubble, Somerset. Here, a small community of environmentalists farm 40 acres of woodland, orchards and pasture. The land is held in common. No grid electricity or fossil fuel is used; power comes from solar panels and a wood-fuelled steam engine. The community's aim is to "live lightly on the earth"--to contribute as little as possible to the portending environmental catastrophe. Tinker's Bubble is one of a growing number of such communities, all of them bound by a discipline worthy of the historical St Benedict.

It is easy to make fun of radical environmentalism. Its climatological projections are often dubious and even if they are accurate, it is not clear how a handful of enthusiasts can avert the coming apocalypse. But that is to miss the point. The green movement may speak the language of science, but what really moves it is an ethical imperative. It is an attempt to create a society in which some choices are recognised as better than others, in which nature is seen to put constraints upon the free play of desire. In short, it is a religion--a religion without God. It is to such spontaneous initiatives of the faithful, not the clunking machinery of state, that we must look for a restoration of life to the language of the virtues.