3. The Independent Self

Why Moral Virtue Is on the Wane

Yuma (Arizona) Sun, September 21, 2002

Talent, like wealth, is often important but mainly for its potential merit. There are talented people who waste their talent, who misjudge what it is good for, who mistake it for wisdom, and who get all enamored with themselves simply because, well, they have it. The same applies to folks with wealth. It's a bit like being taken with oneself just for being good-looking or tall or handsome. But it's what one makes of the talent one has that counts, and then how sensible one is about its scope or reach and how dependable one is in delivering on the potential one possesses. Similarly, when one inherits wealth, it's how one applies it that counts for merit, not having it.

When my daughter was about five, she and I wrote a little book together that we called "Cute Is Not Enough." It was a rather amateurish way to help her realize that just being good-looking—and it was clear to me then that she was and would be when she grew up—would not take her far enough in life. Another useful title could well have been "Talent Is Not Enough."

Both beauty and talent—and for some it could be inherited wealth—are assets with which people are endowed by birth. To make something of these, one must, as the old saying goes, apply oneself. And the rules of application, aside from the special skills required in any profession, include ethics, the skill for living properly, decently, or mor-

ally. In morality, the virtues are the skills everyone needs for living a good or excellent life, including courage, honesty, prudence, generosity, temperance, moderation, and so forth.

One might look at it this way: In life, as one reaches maturity, one takes an oath—just as one does, implicitly or explicitly, on entering a career—to do as well as one can. And as one goes about fulfilling this oath, one draws on one's assets, whatever they may be, to give one's life the best chance of successful development. But one also needs the benefit of general principles to follow, as one makes use of one's talents and other assets. By adhering to the universal, basic principles that ethics identifies for us, we keep on a reasonably steady path of development, whatever the details may be. Folks who fail to heed these general principles, who lack moral virtue, or character, in other words, may have many other assets but will most likely misuse them, abuse them, and carry off a kind of malpractice of living as they go on to their careers, in business, medicine, education, auto mechanics, the performing arts, or whatever. You can find such folks everywhere, including in the headlines—corrupt politicians, business professionals, medical quacks, and so forth, are all in this category.

Some people in different lines of work, including business corporations—no more nor less than people in other areas (politics, education, science, technology, the ministry, what have you)—just try to live off their potential, and those who trust them, unwisely, think that merely by giving free rein to this potential everything will be hunky-dory. And, of course, now and then, by accident rather than through character, determination, and commitment, one can cash in on sheer smarts, raw savvy, and other "talents." It just

isn't a reliable way to go. Virtuosity is no substitute for virtue.

Yet, in our age, it is somewhat understandable that moral virtue is not the aspect of one's life and profession that most people focus on. Intellectuals—philosophers, educators, playwrights, authors, pundits, politicians, and the rest—have been teaching and preaching that what really counts is not being ethically rigid but being flexible, expedient, pragmatic, open-minded. Like the Constitution, the principles of ethics are considered out of date, organic or mortal, rather than steady and lasting. This is the message of postmodernism and its kin, deconstructionism and radical pragmatism. The belief in ethical principles is, for all too many intellectuals, something naïve and even uncouth. Embracing ethics firmly, consistently, is often dismissed as ideology or simplistic rigidity by many prominent, smart thinkers.

Of course, if moral virtue is discredited, perhaps only virtuosity is left as a common enough standard. For example, in academe, and especially in professional philosophy, where standards of right conduct are routinely challenged and viewed by many with skepticism if not outright cynicism, people are judged almost exclusively by how clever, quick-witted, smart, or "brilliant" they are.

So, when those educated at elite institutions, including business schools, fancy what makes them good, they are not encouraged to consider their character—decency, dependability, trustworthiness and the like—as their foremost asset. No, it's got to be something value-neutral, such as IQ or brilliance, and the self-esteem and self-confidence these assets engender in those who are so regarded. Virtue, in short, gets little respect from contemporary thinkers. They are skeptical of its very possibility.

Government and Business—Some Telling Differences

Yuma (Arizona) Sun, August 31, 2002

Competition goes a long way to make those with whom we deal act polite, not ornery, and to make their establishments user-friendly.

As my daughter and I sat during a recent court appearance waiting to be called, with not a clue given about how long this was likely to take, I noticed that every sign in the building that spelled out some rule was put in terms of an order. "Shirts must be worn. "Smoking is prohibited." "No cell phones are allowed." And so on and so forth. Clearly, the tone of these notices conveyed to us all who was in charge, never mind that all those working there, from the police officers, judges, and legal aid attorneys to the security guards, were paid from money confiscated from us all at the point of a gun—by taxation, that is. The bulk of those who work for government do not even pretend to like the people for whom they work, especially not ones who are accused of having committed some infraction of a rule governments have laid down, be it major or minuscule.

In contrast, even when a private business tells us about some government regulation that we must obey, these notices are often put in terms of requests. "Your cooperation will be appreciated," even though it is a law! "Please buckle up," even if it is mandated by the federal government. This is even more true in restaurants, where smoking

is prohibited by state law. There is usually a plea attached, if only as a matter of form.

This all suggests to me that most government (public) servants are latent petty tyrants from the word go—this attitude of issuing orders seems to be in their very bones. They do not even pretend to ask or suggest or propose or even implore, no. They know they've got the guns behind their myriad of rules, and they talk the talk of those with guns, not of those who perform a service.

Why is it that in the private sector even government-imposed rules are conveyed in a more polite fashion? Well, it is pretty simple.

We have a choice to deal with this or that airline, so the airlines treat us like royal subjects, even when the airlines are just messengers of the state. Sure, they have rules, and they may insist on our following such rules, quite apart from government mandates. Insurance companies often insist that private businesses adhere to rules and that their customers obey them—as when we are asked not to use the drive-up window as a walk-up window!

But, despite the mandatory nature of such rules, they are usually laid out for us politely. If you happen to light up in a bar or restaurant, at least in California, the proprietor does not eject you summarily but first asks you to desist. Not so if you do anything wrong at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) or courthouse or similar public realms. "Keep off the grass," orders the sign in the public park!

All this brought to mind the time, in 1994, I visited Sofia, Bulgaria, and stayed at a government-run hotel left over from the socialist era. The surliness of the "help" was notorious. They were perturbed when customers came because, well, the help were doing the customers a thankless public service, not dealing with them in the ways of commerce

where competition and the desire for return business put smiles on people's faces. Shortly after that trip I learned that in the Czech Republic a school had been started for people who dealt with the public in a market economy, to teach them that the surliness they were used to as socialist functionaries would not garner them many customers under even a quasi-capitalist system.

One bad habit of bloated government is that the officials seem to do everything to alienate people from the system. Just consider the prevailing—although not uniform—attitudes of those who deal with the public at the DMV. One might think, well, in courthouses and police stations most people are probably not very nice or have done something that may warrant a measure of surliness. But at the DMV?

Sports in America

Irvington-on-Hudson (New York) Freeman, September 1989

When I arrived in the United States from Hungary in 1956, one of my laments was that Americans didn't do as well as they could in the Olympic Games. The Soviet Union and other Soviet-bloc countries did comparatively better, as anyone who was familiar with the record could tell.

Everyone in my family had been involved in sports. My father rowed and later became one of Europe's better rowing coaches. He even coached in the United States for a while, at Philadelphia's renowned Vesper Boat Club. My mother was 1942 foils champion in Hungary and is still a coach in Salzburg, Austria. My stepfather was a saber fencer in Budapest and is today the U.S. Olympic fencing coach. My sisters were top swimmers in Budapest. I myself did a little of everything, until I decided that I had other priorities and confined myself to just exercise, not serious athletics.

One advantage of being an athlete in Communist Hungary was that if one showed talent and perseverance, one's life was made much better by the state. Under most statist political systems—ones that hold the state as a higher being than the individuals who compose it—sports become a public exhibition of collective excellence. That was especially true in Hungary and is still true in most of the Soviet-bloc countries, as well as in China and in some rightist states such as South Korea. If one demonstrates ability and willingness to become a world-class athlete, one is freed from

all the normal responsibilities of life and is kept in considerable luxury and privilege. For this one sells one's soul and, especially, one's body to the state for as long as one's body holds up.

In my ignorance of the American political tradition, I was appalled at how little investment the American government made in amateur athletics. I noted that, with all its fabulous talent, America could win at virtually any of the Olympic events, if only sufficient resources and discipline were invested in that goal.

But of course here is the rub. American society may include some of the greatest talent for practically any task, including any aspect of athletics. But it is not primarily a statist system. Government in this society is—or at least is supposed to be—a servant of the people. Individuals and their own goals are of paramount importance, not showing off the system, proving to the world how fabulous the social organism happens to be.

Therefore, in America many of the Olympic events are truly amateur sports. Of course, there are exceptions and gray areas—tennis and basketball, for example. But in the main, the athletes compete because that is what they want to do. And these athletes often have a variety of goals in their lives, which shouldn't be surprising for relatively free men and women. Unlike, for example, the East German swimmers, many top American swimmers take time from their training to devote to studying, family, and fun. Why not? Life has much more to offer than being a single-minded athlete. Sport, after all, is supposed to be something of an enjoyment in one's life, not a mission of slave labor.

But I didn't understand this when I first came to the United States. I was a converted nationalist and didn't realize that what made this nation worthy of respect had little

to do with winning the most medals at the Olympics, having the most productive economic system, being first in space, or any other single purpose that some people might want to take as a sign of collective success. What was vital for this nation was that each person had the liberty to strive for his or her own goals in life, as long as he or she didn't trample on the similar efforts of others.

So now when I watch the Olympics my thinking and emotional responses are different from when I first came to the United States. I scoff at the nationalism injected into the commentary. I am usually bemused and even elated, in contrast to the network commentators, when the Americans are not doing as well as the Soviet-bloc athletes—who usually appear glum even after delivering a 9.95 performance in gymnastics!

Free people do not put all their energy into a showy project such as the Olympics, except, now and then, spontaneously. Thus the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics disturbed me, although I realized that most people were celebrating the rejuvenation of the country, of which the American athletes' success in Los Angeles was something of a symbol. But some of the nationalism began to grate on me.

I am a refugee to the United States not because it manufacturers Olympic winners, or the greatest technology in the world, or any other single achievement found in it, but because it is the best environment for people to pursue happiness, according to their own individual talents, abilities, and choices.

Celebrating Liberty, Not Conformity

Orange County (California) Register, April 28, 2003

America's culture and political system can be distinguished from the rest of the world's and from those of much of human history. There is, of course, a lot here that is no different from everywhere else, some great, some OK, and some pretty bad. But what America has more of than most other places is human liberty.

Sure, not all have it in sufficient abundance. Other countries actually have more in certain areas—for example, in much of Europe you are free to smoke and use drugs, and clubs are allowed to stay open late at night. All in all, however, there is much more freedom in America than elsewhere.

This is vital because freedom is a prerequisite of morality, of acting ethically—people aren't morally good when they are forced to behave well. However eager some may be to make us all good, it is simply an impossible task.

Also, freedom is necessary for individuality to flourish. In many societies and periods of history, the reigning idea is "one size fits all." Even the greatest thinkers have made this terrible mistake of thinking that one kind of life is best—even healthy—for everyone. It is from this that we got communism, fascism, totalitarianism, and other regimes where the objective has been or is to make everyone conform to one vision of human excellence. But no such vision can possibly work because we are unique in the living world in

being essentially individuals. Yes, we are social beings, too, but this side of us does not violate our individuality if our human nature is respected, honored.

What I am saying here is actually not tough to prove. Just look around and notice how many decent people are quite different from one another. Some are adventurous, some not, some are loners, some are gregarious, some introverted, and some extroverted—the list could go on and on. Our goals, talents, tastes, and personalities are highly varied, yet oh so human. This is what individualism acknowledges—that we matter as individuals, not as parts of some greater whole. No one can be replaced as the individual he or she is, and we all know this at least implicitly.

Now in America this is more or less consistently understood. And the price we pay for it is that we realize that what others do, for better or for worse, is something over which they have the final say, however much it may displease the rest of us. The great cost of individualism is also its great benefit: an enormous variety of ways to live, both well and badly.

In America this idea is pretty much accepted, at least at gut level, even while many people bellyache about it endlessly. All sorts of pressure groups want to have everyone conform to their agendas, to their priorities, yet even as they want this, they accept individualism in many areas of their lives. Such are the contradictions of our culture.

Those of other cultures, however, are often more severe. In most places the individualist idea hasn't sunk in despite the evidence for it all around. The main source of all the diversity around the globe is just that people are individuals, apart from whatever else they may be. They have given rise to countless varieties of practices, traditions, philosophies,

religions, styles of art, special sciences, and customs of food and dress.

What makes America irksome to many is that it was designed to accommodate a great deal of human variety; so it cannot in all honesty offer a utopian, one-size-fits-all vision of social life. With all this variety there is little hope of getting people to march to the same drummer, to follow the lead of just one guru—or even just one variety of fitness trainer.

And that cannot but annoy those around the globe who want to continue to rule people along such lines.

A Modest Look at Self-Importance

Orange County (California) Register, October 8, 2001

Jay Leno annoyed me his first time back on the air after the September 11 massacre when he said his own job was utterly trivial compared to what the police and fire fighters did in New York City, which lead so many of them to perish. I disagree and suspect he was trying to be profound but missed an important point.

No doubt, some folks are scared to take on risky work, but most of us know that risks go with life itself. Each time we get on the road, board a plane or train, even move around near our homes, we run risks. We also expose ourselves to criminals by simply living in the midst of civilization where they hide and prey on innocents to avoid having to fend for themselves through productive work. Doctors, dentists, accountants, comics, actors, directors—yes, even teachers and columnists—do what is necessary to pursue the work that suits them and gives them a living. We are all contributing, in a great variety of ways, to the flourishing of not just ourselves but of those who count on us to deliver something we can deliver and that they find of value. We are, one might say, all moderately important, only how this comes through is not always visible or dramatic.

Jay Leno, for example, as well as his colleague David Letterman and his predecessor, the highly successful host of the *Tonight Show*, Johnny Carson, may not contribute to our lives with dramatic works, but they amuse us, often just

as we try to relax and close our hectic days. I cannot agree that this is anything trivial. It is no more trivial than is, say, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, or Chopin. There are differences between these and the stand-up comedians who entertain us nightly, but in certain respects they all address important aspects of our lives, more or less successfully. At any particular time, of course, one line of work can be far more significant than another, but this does not diminish what we all do, not at all. We still need to focus, carry it off competently, diligently, on time, considerately, and productively.

Why, then, are some people so tempted to demean what they do? I think the reason is that so many of those who lay out ideas for us—in novels, movies, opinion columns, and commencement speeches—promote humility, deride pride as if it were vanity, and want us all to submerge our egos in some collective mass where no one stands out.

Oddly enough, it is our individualism—the view that we have a right not only to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness but to living well, acting freely and creatively, and succeeding at happiness—that is so often derided by the commentators of our time. And, even more important, it is just that individualism and determination to live well that annoys so many people about us abroad.

But consider this: In most societies throughout human history the tribe is what came first, which meant that the tribal leaders' goals came first, and everyone else had to submit to the leaders' will. That means that individualism was a great threat to most societies, at least as the tribal leaders would have liked those societies to be.

Indeed, America is unique for having placed on record, in a very public way, the idea that you and I and our works matter and are not dispensable in deference to an elite that runs society—the kings, dukes, lords, sheiks, or commissars

who would wish us to abdicate the task of living successfully so that their visions could be given full support.

Yes, America is different in its outlook on social life. It is not the tribe that is most important to most of us but our lives and the lives of those we have chosen to be with. And this is an irritant to tyrants across the globe. But it is nothing for us to be ashamed of. Indeed, it is why we attract so much quiet admiration and jealousy from the ordinary people in most societies and the main reason they want to be here with us rather than suffer an officially inferior status in their own societies.

How Would You Like Being Unfairly Disliked?

Orange County (California) Register, October 22, 1992

For a while in my life, I suffered from the misconception that if I didn't like someone, it had to be because the person had some moral fault. This misconception seems to be a problem for a lot of people.

In the earliest stages of our lives, we get the notion that if we don't like Bobby, the next-door kid, or Susie, our kid sister, or, especially, Aunt Helen—it must be because these people have something wrong with them. But that is really too bad.

Someone should have straightened me out about this early on in my life—I might have gotten into fewer fracases, made fewer enemies, offended fewer folks, and remained on good terms with many more. Instead, I made the mistake of thinking that everything I didn't like in another person must be blameworthy. Not!

The fact is that we do not manage to develop a taste for everything possible to like, to be, to do. And those who have other tastes, other preferences and likes, may not strike us as pleasant.

I really do not like football. Nor baseball. Nor hockey. Nor going to the circus. Nor Roseanne. Nor Murphy Brown. No, I don't like a whole lot of things I encounter in life. I even dislike some of these things: very long skirts on women, Fords, Greyhound buses, and so on. I dislike country western music but love blues. And the list could go on.

But the point is, what does it matter? It only means that it would be best for me to stay away from what I dislike and near what I like and love. I need not—nor need anyone else—take that extra step of condemning what I dislike. So what if it does not please me?

Indeed, one aspect of individuality is that we have our peculiarities. I am a great fan of the color orange. But does it serve to indict others if they do not share this preference of mine? By no means. Their particular lives are such that they have developed different likes and dislikes, some of which may clash with mine. But clashes of likes and dislikes are a far cry from moral conflicts, even conflicts of aesthetic judgment. There is plenty of room for us all, with all our different rankings of what there is in the world around us to relate to, without having to pick on one another on the grounds of such differences.

When I accept that another person likes X, which I dislike, I am not making a moral compromise—I simply realize that this person is not the same as I am. And this understanding may be the clue to how we should appreciate members of different cultures and civilizations.

There is so much unnecessary strife in the world, often because people treat their preferences, tastes, or lifestyles as if these had some universal quality that everyone must honor or be damned for not honoring. Yet it is difficult to tell why some of these differences amount to anything morally significant. After all, we know that Hungarians like more spice in their soup than Danes do—and we do not consider that a ground for morally differentiating between them. Perhaps we ought to see the differences in other aspects of our lives in the same light—as simple differences, not as conflicts between good and evil.

Of course, there are the practices and traits of character

that we shouldn't simply dislike but should condemn as wrong, evil. But it can be a tough task to find out which these are and what we should do about them, if anything. At least we should give more thought to the difference between those aspects of other people's lives that we simply don't want much to do with, and those that we should regard as bad. With a better understanding of the difference, we might spare ourselves a lot of personal and, indeed, international strife.