Heritage Lectures
Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1026
Delivered May 8, 2007

June 6, 2007

Manners and Morals in Democracy

Kenneth Minogue

EDWIN J. FEULNER, Ph.D.: It was at one of my introductory small seminars at the London School of Economics in 1965 that I first met today's lecturer, Ken Minogue. It is noted in the flyleaf of his book, *The Liberal Mind*, which I procured in London for 30 shillings, that he was born in New Zealand, educated in Australia, a graduate of both Sydney and London Universities. He has been professor at the London School of Economics and now emeritus professor at the London School of Economics in political science for more than 40 years. It is a very great pleasure indeed to welcome him here to The Heritage Foundation to deliver a lecture on today's assignment, "Manners and Morals in Democracy."

I personally can't think of a better speaker on this particular subject for several reasons. First, I'm reminded of an essay by Albert Jay Nock in which Nock advocates preaching what is right despite a lack of interest on the part of a given audience—not referring to anyone here, of course, but broader audiences, shall we say, in Washington and indeed throughout the heartland of America. We must continue to seek out and cultivate those who may not know the moral truth outright, because when some of those people hear it, they will be exposed to moral truth, and they will then recognize its validity and its rightness.

We must move back toward civility in public discourse in the manner in which we promote what is right, a subject which I have had occasion to discourse on before here. Today's climate of constant partisan attacks obscures the underlying policy debate, which

Talking Points

- The "moral life" is the human propensity to want to do the right thing, a special kind of self-consciousness and self-doubt, without which you cannot be a human being.
- There are very few moral variants in Western societies that are not to some degree individualistic. It is the idiom of the modern world. It is also very commonly misunderstood.
- Individualism is a highly controlled form of life with a strength and coherence that no traditional society can match. An individualist is someone whose life is built around the coherence of his or her commitments rather than around obedience to rules.
- In sustaining their commitments, individualists exhibit many virtues that often resemble the classical and Christian virtues of earlier thinkers: prudence, chastity, temperance, punctuality, and self-control, all of which are often actively rejected in our modern world.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at: *www.heritage.org/Research/Thought/hl1026.cfm*

Produced by the Office of the President

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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leads people to ignore their civic responsibility and ultimately discourages people from participating in the political process, whether it is the relatively simple, anonymous, and easy act of voting or whether it is taking a more meaningful step and participating in a different way, whether it is as candidate or as visible supporter of candidates.

Frankly, we need more men like Ken Minogue who rise above the divisiveness of contemporary politics to get to the important issues that affect us all. Ken Minogue has written extensively in areas of political theory, and his impressive list of publications includes, first, *The Liberal Mind*, but also *The Concept of a University* and *Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology.* He has lectured extensively at universities and research institutes in the Netherlands, Canada, Germany, Italy, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, and throughout the United States. He was a director of the Center for Policy Studies in London. We are very pleased to have him with us at Heritage.

—Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D., is President of The Heritage Foundation.

KENNETH MINOGUE: It is a great pleasure to be here at The Heritage Foundation, where I have many friends, but it is also an honor. Ed Feulner has built Heritage up from small beginnings to its present position as the colossus of conservative think tanks. In fact, more than that, Heritage has in many ways transcended think-tank status and become a new model of modern social self-understanding, somewhere between a think tank and a university, with the energy of the one and the depth of the other. It is a massive achievement, and I am delighted to be here playing a tiny part in it.

I am by way of being a moral philosopher, and we philosophers are a modest lot. You may remember that Socrates, with his notable (and ironic) humility, didn't want to be called a wise man, a sage, and he said, "I am merely a 'philo-sopher,' a lover of wisdom, rather than someone who actually possesses it." Well, I am sort of a lover of loving wisdom, a philosophical observer of the world at one remove from philosophy itself.

Defining the Moral Life

One of my central interests is the moral life—and what, you may well ask, could that possibly be? It certainly does not mean that I am about to tell you how to behave morally: You all, in one way or another, already know how to do that. What I mean by "the moral life" is the human propensity to want to do the right thing. Needless to say, the saint and the Mafia hit man have very different notions of what it is to do the right thing; but all of them, unless possibly they are the people psychiatrists call "psychopaths," have moments of moral perplexity. I've never met a psychopath, and no doubt they are horrible people, but I suspect that even they have some kind of twisted involvement with moral sentiments.

The moral life is a special kind of self-consciousness and self-doubt, dating back (according to one of the stories we have of it) to the Garden of Eden 6,000 years ago. It is a piece of equipment without which you cannot be a human being.

So I watch human conduct the way a rag and bone man collects discarded trifles of human life, and my method this morning, so far as I have anything so complex as a method, is to begin by pointing your attention to three things that have happened in my lifetime. As you will have gathered from Ed's introduction, it has been quite a lengthy one. First, let me point to three things that have attracted my attention, and then let us draw some conclusions.

The first is the famous pop concert, involving people from all over the world, that in April 2006, sought to make African poverty, as they put it, "history." It was promoted by two popular singers called Bono and Bob Geldof. It collected money for the cause but was basically designed to bring pressure to bear upon the powers of the world, then meeting at a G-8 summit, and persuade them to give more money to Africans. A fairly odd enterprise, you might think, and very typical of the world of modern democracy in that it consisted of a lot of people keen to spend other people's money. The fantasy disposal of vast quantities of public money is one of the interesting features of our democracy.

The second thing I want to point to is the propensity in my lifetime for people to introduce each

other merely by Christian names: "Hi, Fred, this is Emma," etc. etc. Family names are thought to be a bit formal, a bit distancing, so we are into instant intimacy.

And the third phenomenon I find interesting is the emergence of the word "relationship," which I think I can reasonably date to the late 1950s, when I first became aware of it in the comedy sketches of Mike Nichols and Elaine May, though it must have been current in America rather before that time.

Here, then, are three subjects for meditation, and they are significant for us because we are, I take it, all supporters of individualism and the free market. I shall argue that each of the phenomena I have mentioned contributes to the undermining of those things that we admire.

Individualism and Commitment

The real target of my arguments is the belief that individualism is really just selfishness and the market a generator of social injustices. In more moralistic comments, the suggestion is that we are all becoming increasingly selfish, consumerist, and narcissistic and that these evils result from competition between individuals. The consequence is an inequality over which we should be wringing our hands, though I am not sure whether the main problem is some people being too poor or some people being too rich. The doctrine I am criticizing suggests that excessive poverty is a consequence of excessive wealth, that—in other words—an economy is a zero-sum game. My target is, thus, rather simple-minded but not less influential for all that.

If, as here, you diagnose some kind of social evil, the next question becomes: What must we do about it? If you put the problem in that form, the obvious thing is that the state should get more into the business of regulating our desires and impulses, and that is, roughly speaking, what in many countries has been happening. If the diagnosis of our moral condition is unbridled selfishness, the remedy is often thought to be something called "social responsibility." But how can you be responsible to something as amorphous as "society"? As Hayek once said, "If you put the word 'social' in front of any serious word, you reduce it almost to meaninglessness."

I think that is probably true in this case, but you can get hints of what it means in the mouths of those who advance it by being alert to the currency of certain kinds of moral cliché: for example, "I want to give something back" or "I want to make a difference." You understand these things by joining the dots, and what is revealed is a new moral cast of mind.

When I am dealing with a question of this kind, especially in another country, I read the newspapers with special care and attention. I'd only been in America a few days when I came across an interview with an actress called Natalie Portman. I know nothing else about her, and I'm sure she is a delightful woman. It was her words that interested me. She said that she was an activist, and she added, "I admire those who have done things and made substantial changes…like Bono, and Angelina Jolie." "They are," she added, "models for how you can meaningfully devote your life to causes."

These are very puzzling remarks. We have all, of course, "done things," but Miss Portman was using the expression in a special way. "Doing things" signified contributing to some good cause. "Making substantial changes" might be admirable if it changed the worse for the better, but you never know whether you have done so until time has revealed the consequences.

Most interesting of all was the rather similar idea that it was a good thing, in itself, "to devote your life to causes." Millions of Americans, it will be remembered, devoted themselves to the cause of Communism in the course of the 20th century under the illusion that they were working for radical reform of our manner of life in the West. It turned out, however, that their preference was not at all for the better over the worse. The "cause" turned out to be a ghastly mistake. Causes often do. Yet here was this beautiful woman eager to immolate herself for some "cause"—content unspecified!—in order to make her life meaningful. It is a strange, rather abstract passion for self-sacrifice. I don't believe she meant it for a moment, but what interests me is that she had picked up this doctrine almost as a form of conversational patter.

Ms. Portman's idealism, one might say, is worthy of a better "cause." She actually has a life—rather a

successful one, it seems—as an actress, and like most people she will spend most of her time and find much of her fulfillment in life from the energy and perhaps sacrifice she puts into that; but here, in presenting herself to the public, she has picked up these floating wisps of doctrine from the atmosphere, and they have led her into the kind of rather pompous sentiments that have often made celebrities (Miss Fonda, for example) look absurd.

We are dealing here with the small change of moral and political understanding, but small change can tell you a lot. You will undoubtedly have come across Margaret Thatcher's famous remark that "there is no such thing as society. There's only you and me." It was a casual remark made in an interview with a women's magazine. Her opponents made hay with this remark, never bothering to ask what it meant, and took it as an expression of selfishness. All that conservatives cared about was doing well in the economic rat race.

Such misinterpretations used to be one of my tests of political stupidity. You could tell a fool a mile off from his or her response to this remark. But it now strikes me that the whole episode is rather more interesting than that. Why has this sentence been fastened upon as if it were a revelation? Well, it is supposed to reveal the dirty little secret of libertarians and conservatives—people like you and me—as the fact we try to hide; namely, that we don't really care about other people, about "society," only about "getting on." It is that illusion of the critics of conservatism to which I am pointing this morning. One interesting thing about this conviction among liberals and socialists is that it generally surfaces only in the casual undertow of conversation, though increasingly it is moving into journalistic commentary.

The basic proposition believed by our moral critics, then, is that the problem with modern Western societies is excessive individualism, or "hyperindividualism" as it is sometimes called. So let's test this belief by juxtaposing it against one or two realities as seen in the three events I have tossed up for examination.

The first of these, you will remember, was the grand concert designed to make African poverty "history." It is, of course, a very strange ambition, because the only people who can achieve that outcome would be Africans themselves. We can, no doubt, give them some help, and we certainly ought to do so, but to imagine that this achievement is *our* responsibility is absurd. It is pure fantasy to imagine that we in the West can transform the lives of 300 million or 400 million Africans by giving them money.

There is, of course, no secret about how states become richer. Europeans found a way, and now many states all over the world from Singapore to India are doing it. In Africa there are, of course, specific problems. Back in the 1970s, a famous salesman of rather dubious shares said he would only deal with people who "sincerely wanted to be rich." Perhaps we should ask the same question of many Africans.

But that point is not at all the most interesting fact about the thousands from all over the Western world who participated in that famous concert. The thing that interests me is that here was an audience embracing a great world-transforming public posture, yet large numbers of them were unmarried because they could not make appropriate commitments, had no children of their own, and in some cases were still at an advanced age, living with their parents. No doubt I am being unfair to quite a number of them, yet the contrast between the fantasy of public posturing and the moral capacity to organize their own individual lives can hardly be missed. That is to say, by contrast with their elders a generation or so back, they were people who hadn't quite dealt with the most obvious problems of their own personal lives. It's sometimes called "commitment phobia."

The difference is, I suppose, that the young of earlier time understood that liberation from their parents involved leaving home and that it would soon lead to marriage, family, and the familiar responsibilities of adult life. This was crossing what Joseph Conrad in a famous story called "the shadow line" into adult independence. Men moved into careers, women into marriage, and in these institutions was to be found the central meaning and satisfaction of life. All sorts of people for all sorts of reasons had a different trajectory and found other ways of maturity. Apart from some of the rich, how-

ever, most people could not indulge a life of youthful indulgence, and most were not in fact even tempted by it.

This track toward maturity no longer stretches ahead for today's generation with the same insistence, and a lot of people continue to live in a rather strange interregnum between childhood and the adult world. Their moral instincts seem now to be more focused on grandiose projects for world reform—projects that generally require less in the way of deep commitment.

Family Names and Identity

Let me now move to my second observation about the contemporary world: the common practice of introducing strangers to each other merely by their Christian names—"Fred, this is Henrietta," and so on. This seemed to me interesting for a number of reasons. The coming of family names was a relatively late development in European practice, many people still being known in the 18th century by their Christian names. In Turkey, I gather, it came as late as the Kemal Ataturk revolution of 1923, and in some places it has still not come.

A family name is significant because it gave one a past and linked one to the future. The Abbé Sieyès wrote a pamphlet about the Third Estate at the time of the French Revolution in which he attacked the aristocracy who gave themselves airs (and privileges) because they could trace their ancestry back to the Franconian forests, as against the vast numbers of French people who were merely *hommes d'hier*. Slavemasters called slaves by their Christian names. Who knows Mammy's surname in *Gone with the Wind*? A family name was thus, for earlier generations, a move into a more serious social status. For our contemporaries, however, names are merely identifying marks rather than terms of identity.

Having a surname, then, indicated a past and a future and gave a certain solidity to people, a formality which distanced them from others, until the point when they might choose to favor you with their intimacy. In French and other continental languages, this movement into intimacy is marked by a special grammatical form—*tutoyer*. To use the familiar form in addressing others was a large step, and it is a piece of formality that we casual Anglophones have allowed to fall into disuse.

The English have retained some slight sense of distance, as in old jokes about two Englishmen meeting in some remote jungle but unable to speak to each other because they had never been introduced. Today, however, the exclusive use of Christian names is as common in Britain as it seems to be in the United States.

The point is the availability of intimacy. In contemporary life, we are often on terms of immediate intimacy with people we have just met. We do not like people who are aloof, stand-offish, distant. Affability is the career grade of our social relations, and it makes us what Burke called butterflies of a season: people who look forward to their next satisfaction rather than backward to their last experience.

But it is only in looking back that we have a sense of our own identity. European individualism, as it developed from the 15th century onwards, certainly accorded each person his (and later her) own arena of self-management or autonomy, but it was also a practice in which custom largely dictated the kinds of identity an individual embraced. Each person had an inherited allegiance to country, class, and customs, and formal address was, in this world, a way in which individuals sustained a certain distance from each other.

So what is the significance, you may ask, of my highlighting these two events? One point I would like to make is to relate social distance to our capacity for sustaining freedom. If we are too close to other people, we often find it difficult to stand out against whatever they seem to be thinking. The same is true of the capacity to make commitments that emerge from one's own inner life. Respect often accrues to whoever stands, in some degree, apart from others: a point sometimes dramatized (and no doubt overdramatized) in Westerns in which the hero is pitted against a lynch mob. The hero in these dramas generally stands for procedure, for formality, for the rule of law against the impulse to indulge in what the mob for the moment imagines is the imperative of a just punishment.

My argument is thus that certain social usages common in the past but disappearing in our casual

and affable world had an important connection with the capacity for freedom that we cherish. This argument is, of course, one reason why a concern with the moral life as I have sketched it is not entirely irrelevant to commonly political and economic concerns of The Heritage Foundation. My thesis is that freedom is in some degree threatened by the decline of the formality that previously sustained a certain valuable distance in our lives.

This is a theme broached many, many years ago by that marvelous American sociologist David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*. Riesman distinguished between the tradition-directed peoples of the Middle Ages, the inner-directed people of the modern world, and an emerging class of what he called "other-directed" people, characterized by their extreme sensitivity to current beliefs in the circle in which they lived. Here we have a sociological version of part of the moral argument I am advancing, though it is certainly sociology with a moral undertone.

I speak as an Anglophone who grew up in Australia and New Zealand and has been living in Britain for many years. The British, it is well known, have a class system, and many people think that this is a deplorable prejudice. Like Peter Bauer, who once wrote a pamphlet called "Class on the Brain," I think that people usually misunderstand this. The thing called "class" is actually made up of many components: money, lineage, accent and manners, and—perhaps most important of all—a belief in one's own superiority to others. And it isn't really a "system," but rather a collection of often contradictory responses to other people.

One common project in our egalitarian times is to get rid of whatever counts as a "class system," which is to be found in all countries, including the United States. Yet it is also true that in our mobile times, people from all backgrounds "get on" in the world, often rather successfully. It takes some courage, of course, but then there is no form of life that does not call upon one virtue or another. The attempt to destroy class and create "a level playing field" would certainly make courage less necessary. It would, in some respects, be the attempt to create a world safe for those without much courage or enterprise.

At this point, I am suggesting to you that a set of things we happen to admire fit together as a kind of package—social distance, enterprise, formality, courage, and individualism—and we must then ask: What is it, if anything, that holds these things together? What is it that links them all? What conception of the human condition is assumed in admiration for these qualities?

The answer is, I think, that it is life understood as a competitive game. It is a conception of life that has long dominated the modern world. Such a conception underlies the English common law system no less than our competitive economies, and it is a conception of life that led to extensive codification of the rules of many sports in late Victorian England.

Understanding life, as many of the English do, in terms of the game of cricket is no doubt an admirable lesson in moral excellence, but it should also be recognized that the understanding of Western life in terms of *homo ludens*—man the player of roles—is by no means always admirable. Often, it has amounted to a ceaseless attempt by some people to show that they were "one up" on others, and it was certainly compatible with a great deal of social contempt. That is one of the reasons most of us today rather prefer our casual, free and easy ways.

The doctrine of social responsibility, criticizing our deplorably individualistic ways, is clearly hostile to the idea of life as a kind of game. Its drive is to turn people into instruments of what are thought to be good causes. The problem with games is that they generate both winners and losers, and for proponents of social responsibility, the moral problem is how to help the losers.

Here, then, we have a conception of society entirely different from the ludic conception that is taken for granted by individualists. The social responsibility ethic rests upon the assumption that a society is a collection of people with needs and that the business of public policy—and moral enterprise—is how to arrange satisfaction for those needs. Contemporary societies are rejected as according too much to some people and too little to others.

Society as a system of needs is certainly a very powerful modern idea. It animated Marx, Lenin, and all the people who have led revolutions in many

countries aiming—as Natalie Portman said—to "change things." They were all very keen on changing things.

Individualism and "Relationships"

I made three observations about the modern world, and I have not yet discussed that interesting word "relationship." I think I can date it almost precisely to the late 1950s during the satire boom—the satire boom featuring in America Mort Sahl, Tom Lehrer, and Elaine May and Mike Nichols. It had a British parallel that included David Frost and Spike Milligan and Dudley Moore.

I think the satire movement popularized a certain kind of attitude to public affairs that has profoundly changed the culture in which we lived. We laughed greatly at the time, and in a way, we are still laughing at the absurdities of public figures. The problem is that all human beings are, from one point of view or another, absurd, and the result of the satire boom is that we can no longer quite take public figures with whatever seriousness ought to be accorded to them. Automatic derision is no more rational than automatic reverence.

The idea of a relationship seemed interesting to me at the time, because I didn't think I had had any. I did, of course, have all the usual complement of social life: I had friends, kin, acquaintances, uncles, cousins, and so on; but all of these expressions carried with them a certain concreteness that distinguished them from the abstraction "relationship."

The very term "relationship" was part of a process of abstraction in which the connection between one human being and another could come to be entirely dominated by what A wanted to get from B, and B from A. It may sound implausible, but that simple fact had never crossed my mind before.

The point lies in the process of abstraction, which is (at last!) the central theme of the moral argument I want to present to you. The relationship between prostitute and client is, I suppose, the classic model of a "relationship" because it consists of nothing but an impulse and its satisfaction.

The most perfect example I know of this is to be found in the case of a pop singer interviewed some little time ago and asked about his sexual practices. I'm sorry about this demotic example; I'm sort of dragging you through the mud, but you've got to be brave. The pop singer was asked why he paid girls to sleep with him when they were lining up all around the block to do so. He said, "You've got it wrong. I don't pay them to sleep with me. I pay them to go home afterwards."

This is, of course, the precise point of pornography. The client has a simple, uncomplicated desire for sex and has no patience with those boring social complications—such as chatting to the prostitute—that may not be quite what we actually want but that give a certain concreteness to our lives. Our pop singer has a relationship in its most uncomplicated form. He gets the sex and is troubled by nothing else.

Now, if we broaden our focus and consider the economy as a whole, you will observe that progress in the satisfaction of our desires consists in the continuous provision of convenience. Buying groceries two or three generations ago required visiting a number of shops and probably chatting with those serving you, which you might enjoy but you might also find rather tiresome. A supermarket is a marvelous advance on that. You visit one emporium, collect what you want, put the items in a basket, and then you pay.

If you want to get someplace, you can save time by flying or by taking the train. Modern transport will speed you where you want to go without the frustration of having to wait all those long, possibly reflective hours as the horses trundle along. In the past, the experience of visiting someone, if you could, took time and thus involved a certain amount of reflection. Today, it takes much less time and virtually no reflection because (another of those grand advances in convenience) mechanical devices may well occupy your mind from the beginning of the journey to the end. The experience is a succession of impulses, each of which may be easily satisfied by modern technology, and the economy is forever exploring new and better forms of convenience.

Convenience in practical matters is, in moral and psychological terms, a form of abstraction. Let me explain what I mean by emphasizing the distinction between desires and impulses.

The classic understanding of individualism was based on desire, which combined, on the one

hand, appetites and aversions (I am using the terminology of the philosopher Hobbes) and, on the other hand, rationality. The agent had to consider many aspects of a situation and come to a decision about it. A big decision, such as marriage, involved a whole range of considerations before an agent could sensibly make his or her move, but even a commitment to visit a distant friend involved balancing what economists now call "opportunity costs." Shopping required planning future menus, adapting to the hours the shop might be open and conversations with the shopkeepers that might be tiresome, though they might also be counted as additional benefits.

Going to a supermarket, which is now likely to be open at most hours of the day and contains everything the shopper might want (and indeed very much more), requires very much less planning, less of an exercise of prudence, less of an input of rationality. The shopper of past times moved from one concrete experience to the next, while our contemporaries in part can respond to impulses without much need for deliberation.

An Emerging Moral Idiom

I conclude that the growth in wealth and the successes of our economic system, highly gratifying though they are, also have largely unseen consequences in changing the way we live in the world. Our very psychology is different.

I do not wish to exaggerate the point by suggesting that a completely new moral world has come into existence. Societies are extremely complex, and they resemble old manuscripts that have been written over again and again: They are a "palimpsest." Moral forms survive often from the distant past. Occasionally, they survive in something like a fossilized form, as with the Amish in the United States, and some might regard the Mormons as another such survival of an earlier form of moral experience. There is a world of difference between a New York sophisticate, a San Francisco swinger, and a Southern Baptist.

Modern societies are wonderlands of different moral experience; yet moral fashions do change, and in changing, they affect the way in which most people live. I am concerned in these remarks to pinpoint an emerging moral "idiom" that responds to our modern conditions, and it probably affects many of you in our audience today because you are, as it were, at the cutting edge of contemporary life.

In this wonderland of moral variety, the assumptions that you and I have grown up with—those of individualism—are central, for many reasons. One basic reason is that there are very few moral variants in our Western societies which are not in some degree or another individualistic. It is the idiom of the modern world, and, therefore, any attack on it such as the one I have been describing is a very important development.

The problem is that individualism is very commonly misunderstood. Enemies have tried to reduce it to mere selfishness. As often described, it seems to be a license to indulge any impulse one might entertain. In fact, it is almost exactly the opposite of that. It is a highly controlled form of life in which order has been very largely internalized, and it thus has a strength and coherence that no traditional society can match. An individualist is someone whose life is built around the coherence of his or her commitments rather than around obedience to rules.

In sustaining their commitments, individualists exhibit many virtues, and these virtues often resemble the classical and Christian virtues of earlier thinkers. They include prudence, chastity, temperance, punctuality, and self-control, and they are all in some degree being rendered redundant, indeed often actively rejected, in our modern world. We have already seen the way in which the process of abstraction facilitates a less thoughtful world of indulging impulses. The vast technical achievements of the modern world thus have important moral consequences.

No less influential is the evolution of so-called welfare states, in which individuals are in some degree protected against various slings and arrows of fortune. For example, the virtue of punctuality—the courtesy of kings, as it used to be known—is less important in a world of mobile phones, by which the young rearrange their schedules almost from hour to hour.

Chastity as a virtue has both moral and prudential components, but the prudential components

have been virtually eliminated by modern medicine and contraception. Prudence, as we saw, is much less necessary in many of the small activities of life, and free medicine and other benefits undermine the disposition to save for a rainy day.

Again, the courage that used to be necessary in the past (and no doubt still is in some degree) to confront a host of prejudices one might encounter has been greatly diminished by the enforcement of rights. Self-control (and the "stiff upper lip") is now much less admired than it used to be because many of the impulses requiring control have been redefined as forms of addiction and brought under the realm of therapies. Indeed, self-control itself is now regarded with distaste by many as a form of unhealthy psychological repression.

I think it was Dostoevski who remarked that anesthesia was the modern substitute for stoicism. Similarly, temperance now provokes counseling or medical solutions. And you will observe that in dealing with this change in our lives, I have merely scratched the surface.

Indeed, my whole paper has been merely a scratching of the surface of a rather intrusive itch in the moral life of our civilization. You and I, I think, are likely to reject that idea that society is simply an association of people with variably satisfied needs. We have a more adventurous disposition to admire those who play the game of life with some panache. Our admirations, however, are under attack by those who believe that they have discovered the one right way to think and the one right way to act. Such a belief is a deadly threat to the dynamism of our lives.

The Undermining of Virtue

My argument may perhaps be summed up in one proposition: The best way of orienting oneself amid the current confusions is the focusing on clarity and understanding of what our moral individualism actually consists of.

Individualism emerged from Christianity and from a number of medieval beliefs and practices and came into being in about the 16th century by convention, and then it developed. It was never the same. No abstraction is the same from generation to generation; they all keep on changing. The point about it, though, is that this was a highly controlled form of social life in which order had been internalized.

Traditional societies are terrified of individualism because they imagine it means people doing what they feel like doing and being anarchic. It doesn't, of course, and what happened with individualism was a creation of a form of life so tough and structured that it conquered the world. It has many features, some of which I have been hinting at, and I think is being undermined. It is a form of life in which there are a whole string of virtues.

Different people exhibit different virtues; but the life of causes, the life of social responsibility which I've been talking about, is one which changes the moral theory of what is the right thing to do by imagining that it is exhausted by the distinction between selfishness, which is individual self-indulgence on the one hand, and benevolence or altruism, usually of an abstract kind, on the other. We must be altruistic toward others: the poor in Africa, the vulnerable in Arab society, perhaps the generations yet unborn, and so on.

So here are two forms of life, and in individualism, you needed certain things—chastity, for example. If you thought chastity was simply self-preservation—it prevents pregnancy, and it prevents picking up diseases, and so on—then you needed chastity; but these days, there are antibiotics and contraception of all kinds. Prudence: You needed to be prudent; you needed to save money; but in many countries now, you don't have to save money—for example, in looking forward to a possible medical emergency—so you don't need to be quite as prudent.

I could go through a whole string of virtues. Courage is less necessary in a world of rights and equalizations and affirmative action than it used to be. So what seems to me to be happening is, over a certain range of human experience, the virtues of this kind are no longer necessary and are bifurcated into this selfishness/altruism alternative.

What I am suggesting to you is that this is a relatively new moral attitude. It obviously has close affinities with socialism.

Conclusion

Let me end by saying I'm not quite suggesting that this is a matter of decadence. I think that the

old individualist world, which still exists, has a lot of defects in it. It's a fairly violent, exclusive world, quite happily excluding all sorts of people. The new world that we're talking about—the world in which people can indulge their impulses without the costs that would obviously have been incurred in the past—is an amiable, agreeable world in which we all live. It has quite a lot to be said for it, but I think if it became universal, our situation would decline.

Questions & Answers

QUESTION: I really appreciated your remarks. I wonder if you could comment about the idea of individualism and the concept of shared responsibility.

PROFESSOR MINOGUE: It is part of the attack on individualism to suggest that it assumes modern society to be full of isolates who cannot cooperate and that, in order to get cooperation, you need socialism and togetherness of an organized and collectivist kind.

My sometime colleague Ernest Gellner had an idea of modularity which I think is quite interesting in this regard. He was concerned with traditional societies in which a priest was a priest, a warrior was a warrior, a scholar was a scholar—you remember those Chinese fingernails, which allowed good brushwork but you obviously couldn't clean your teeth very well with them, and so on.

The thing about the modern world is that it's a bit like modular furniture, where you can buy this bit and that bit and you can arrange them around. You can, in other words, share responsibilities because this is a set of people who will respond to any situation in terms of what they think and what they tend to agree is needed.

Drop them on a desert island—I haven't been watching that TV series about the plane crash, but I imagine that these are reasonably resourceful people who can cooperate very well—the model for that, and it's one of the great texts of individualism, is *Robinson Crusoe*. I'm told that no Brahman could be Robinson Crusoe because there are certain essential parts of life which have to be performed by people of a different caste. Robinson Crusoe can do absolutely anything, the grand things and the sordid things.

QUESTION: Now that the Queen is here for the moment, maybe you can tell us a little bit about the British class system. Is there a movement to knock it down or raise it up, or what is the status of that?

PROFESSOR MINOGUE: Very interesting indeed. The point about my understanding of the class system is, I got it from American movies in the first place. For example, I discovered there was a place in San Francisco called Nob Hill, which was a pretty good place to be, and that some people lived on the wrong side of the tracks. I think Ronald Reagan did in *King's Row*, for example. These were vivid examples of how society was bifurcated.

An Australian in England is outside the class system, though there was once a play in which a woman comes in and says, "Those bloody Australians; they're everywhere," and for a moment I thought I was going to experience the bracing possibility of prejudice against Australians. But the horror is, if people dislike me, they dislike me not for any extraneous reason like class or race, but because I'm intolerable or whatever.

This is a tragedy. You can't have a movement to try and remove a class system; it's not a system. That word "system" gets everything wrong. Class in England was a recognition that there are different ways of life. The northern working class knew their place, but they also thought they were the salt and the backbone of the country. In some respects, they looked at the aristocracy and thought these were terrific people, and they looked at the professional middle class, but they also felt that those who lived down south were fraudsters living off them, not really producing anything.

So the class system is in part a recognition of the difference between ways of life. There are people who want to democratize England; they would quite like to—not many—abolish the monarchy and have an elected head of state. My own view is that we need to preserve the royals. Last night I was listening to Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and he regards Republicans in New York as an endangered species, and I regard royals as an endangered species, and I think it's valuable to preserve them.

QUESTION: How do you view television playing a role with manners, morals, and democracy?

I've given some thinking to the way people relate to television in contrast to a movie or a play or a novel. In some ways, it's the most personal medium, but then it also can be very impersonal. You can easily change the channel, turn it on and off, and it seems like a lot of times people substitute their television relationships with real relationships.

PROFESSOR MINOGUE: Somebody said that ours is the age of uniform partial attention; that is, people are very seldom alone. The television's on; they may not be watching it; but there's noise in the background, or else there's music in the background, or else they're on the cell phone. They are very seldom alone.

Television, as you say, is both a warm and a hot medium. Who was the famous Canadian student of the media who thought it was a hot movement? It is the kind of thing that destroys the integrity of people's lives. They do not have to develop their own modes of life because they are constantly imitating others.

I said that there was a new form of morality in which impulses were let loose. There is a new form, furthermore, of morality in which the idea is that if you have the right belief in your skull, you will act in the right way. That's what political correctness, I take it, is about. If you have been purged of any sense of hate or, indeed, any discrimination between men and women, black and white, yellow and brown, able and disabled, then you will respond to every human, everything you recognize as a human being, in an identical way.

I think it's almost an impossibility, but the dream is that if we can get that idea into people's minds—and we do it by role models and by propaganda and by making it unthinkable to think anything else—then people will behave better. That's the key to how society will become better and more perfect.

That's why I think there is so much talk about role models. If a model is to be found sniffing coke, that's a terrible thing because it might entail other people to do the same thing. It's two conceptions of how you lead the moral life. In the one, you belong to a moral tradition, and you have a number of rules that help you to orient yourself, and when you meet a new circumstance, you think about it; you relate the more abstract to the circumstantial; and you make whatever decision you make, right or wrong.

This is a conception of the moral life in which you have the right opinions on the subject, on abstract subjects like race and gender and so on; and if you have those, then you would automatically make the right decisions. What, in part, they are trying to get at is the kind of thugs who beat up a homosexual or a black or something like that. All of this is what any of us would want, but it's the grounds that interest me; it's the way in which people get at it.

QUESTION: Could you tell us how the liberal mind versus the conservative mind affects the moral life?

PROFESSOR MINOGUE: The difference between a liberal and a conservative, I take it, is that a conservative is very cautious about any change because there is a basic skepticism about what causes what in human life. If you change X, you will almost certainly have a lot of unintended consequences, and some of them will be very nasty. A liberal in America tends to be almost what I would call a socialist. A liberal is somebody who is moving toward a vision of a better society which is free and tolerant and open to all religions and against all forms of prejudice and so on.

In other words, a liberal has something like a blueprint for a better society which guides his or her moral intuitions and perhaps their attitudes toward public policy, whereas a conservative is much more likely to say, in the famous phrase, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Don't mess around with things; preferably, governments do more harm than good.

Certain sorts of liberals—libertarians, certainly—agree with conservatives that governments mostly do more harm than good; but there is an important caveat to that, which is that a conservative, while suspicious of government, doesn't necessarily say that the government that governs the least is always the best. It usually is, but you don't want to take a position on that.