

To Rave Is Madness

by

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This essay is dedicated to the Robins.

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caveat lector

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Western Ideas

I happened, recently, to look up in one of my dictionaries the definition of humility. Here it is.

humility...the quality or state of being humble
—*WEBSTER'S Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1987

Naturally, I looked up humble. This is what I found.

humble...: not proud or haughty : not arrogant or assertive **2**: reflecting, expressing, or offered in a spirit of deference or submission <a ~ apology> **3**: ranking low in a hierarchy or scale: INSIGNIFICANT, UNPRETENTIOUS...
—*WEBSTER'S Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1987

That we define humility in terms of arrogance is a disappointing revelation. That is, we necessarily define it in terms of something that we understand and, sadly, we're quite familiar with arrogance. In addition, to define it in terms of submission or apology reflects our superficial perception of it when we've encountered it. Finally, to place it low on any hierarchy, to brand it as insignificant, indicts our values. It isn't surprising, I suppose, for our Western culture to fall so far short of the mark in understanding what is, after all, a rather foreign concept.

In this series of essays, I've tended to deal with language, which is crucial to understanding. To understand humility, for example, we need to understand more than its opposite. We need a better understanding of words like respect, reverence, and consideration. Those are difficult concepts in our Western culture, where formal behavior passes for respect, where reverence is viewed as something reserved for church, and where consideration usually causes you to tip generously. Our understanding is also limited by the problem of nonexistent words. Humility isn't the state or quality of being humble. Being humble, as you can see from the definition, is a different sort of thing. However, we don't have an adjective to properly put in its place when defining humility. Our failure to understand humility goes hand-in-hand with our inability to define it, and who can say which came first?

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Digital Thinking

It often happens that new concepts might be lurking within old ones but haven't been sorted out yet. An example of this is what I call Jonathan's Distinction, after the man from whom I first heard it.¹ In the dictionaries, ethics and morality are defined in terms of one another and, indeed, most people would respond that there isn't really any difference between the two. Jonathan's Distinction suggests a difference.

According to Jonathan's Distinction, morality is the determination of correct behavior according to assumptions while ethics is the determination of correct behavior according to consequences. Consider, for example, killing.² A moral code of behavior might proclaim that it's wrong to kill. The assertion doesn't require justification and need not depend upon circumstances. It isn't susceptible to proof or refutation. It's an assumption. A code of ethics, however, may assert that killing is wrong only if such killing demonstrably causes more harm than good. That judgment of consequences is far more complex and difficult than the moral assertion. Suppose that the man to be killed is a proven serial killer. Is it possible that more killing might be caused by leaving him alive (to continue killing) than by killing him? On the other hand, who can measure the harm done within a culture by its use of capital punishment and balance that harm against the harm that **might** be done by letting killers live? Even if those questions can be answered, it might not yet be the end of the quandary. Suppose this particular serial killer kills only other serial killers. Maybe total killing in the future can be reduced by leaving him alive to do his work. Maybe he should be hired as a cop. Whether or not the example seems far fetched, it illustrates the potential complexity of ethical judgment as compared to a simple moral assumption. Jonathan's Distinction suggests (among other things) that before we can decide upon the virtue of capital punishment in Western culture, we must first understand both morality and ethics and the differences between them.

1 Jonathan Steele.

2 I've intentionally declined to use the word murder because it denotes a killing that is wrong. The word kill, however, may denote the act without implying a moral or ethical judgment.

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Digital Thinking



Each advancement in understanding reveals new frontiers of uncertainty. Jonathan's Distinction isn't an exception. When one understands the differences between morality and ethics, and attempts to determine which he's using, he discovers that neither alone is adequate. The benefit versus harm in an ethical determination can be judged only against previous and fundamental assumptions of right and wrong. Thus, ethical reasoning must begin from what can only be morality. On the other hand, moral behavior is usually exhorted in terms of ultimate consequences, which is ethical-style reasoning. The two beliefs thus turn out to be another yin and yang. They're different from one another, they depend upon one another, and they can't be divorced from one another. That points to a general truth. Eventually, we must learn that all things are different and that we must respect the differences. We must learn that everything is connected to everything else and that the connections are severed only at the risk of great loss. In the complex reality of life, nothing is ever quite as simple as it seems.

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Statutes and the Common Law

“.... Again, customary laws have more weight, and relate to more important matters, than written laws, and a man may be a safer ruler than the written law, but not safer than the customary law.”

—from *Politics*, Book 3, Chapter 16
by Aristotle

COMMON LAW -.... Perhaps the most important of these narrower senses is that which it [the common law] has when used in contradistinction to statute law, to designate unwritten as distinguished from written law. It is that law which derives its force and authority from the universal consent and immemorial practice of the people. It has never received the sanction of the legislature by an express act, which is the criterion by which it is distinguished from the statute law.... The decision of a court which established or declares a rule of law may be reduced to writing and published in the reports; but this report is not the law: it is but evidence of the law; it is but a written account of one application of a legal principle, which principle, in the theory of the common law, is still unwritten. However artificial this distinction may appear, it is nevertheless of the utmost importance, and bears continually the most wholesome results. It is only by the legislative power that law can be bound by phraseology and by forms of expression. The common law eludes such bondage: its principles are not limited nor hampered by the mere forms in which they may have been expressed, and the reported adjudications declaring such principles are but the instances in which they have been applied. The principles themselves are still unwritten, and ready, with all the adaptability of truth, to meet every new and unexpected case....

—from *Bouvier's Law Dictionary*, 1889

The uncertainty in determining correct behavior, and our imperfect understanding of any basis for it, is a problem for us. A study of history or of current events reveals the horrors that people commit when they try to impose a system of belief on others who do not share it. Given the shameful record of Western culture in that regard,³ I cannot believe that any system of behavior based only on moral assumptions is worthy of mandatory implementation. On the other hand, what legislature is competent to unravel the complex threads of ethics, and enact ethics into legislation? These considerations convincingly remove the determination of correct behavior from the legitimate purview of legislation, which is inherently coercive. Most readers will probably cringe in their chains and whimper “anarchy!”

Perhaps, however, there's an alternative. The common law is the accumulation from antiquity of things that work. Legislation is merely somebody's opinion of how everybody else ought to behave. Given a respected body of common law, I can't see any reason to have any legislation at all. Remedy can be just as well obtained, and justice just as well be served, by judgment of every alleged offence by a jury of local people using the common law.

The entire judicial procedure can be customary. It need not be defined by legislation and it need not even reside within a branch of constituted government. A jury of free, informed, and consenting adults, freely convened, is always competent to judge offenses using only the common law, tempered only by courtesy. Indeed, if that isn't true then we don't have any business advocating self-government. Every injured party has the incentive to convene such a jury and every member of the community has the incentive to serve on it against the day that he himself might need such service from the community. Customary law was acknowledged over 2000 years ago as a safer rule than legislation and simple courtesy in its administration will prevent the

3 Go find an encyclopedia. Study such subjects as crusades, inquisition, torture, witchcraft, and conquest.

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tyranny of convention. Legislation was acknowledged over 2000 years ago as the least reliable source of rule yet today we have deemed it supreme, placing it above even ourselves.

The Call of the Wild

A couple of million years ago (supposedly), men acquired certain differences from their nearest animal relatives and became (whatever it may mean) men. According to the modern consensus, life in cities began about five thousand years ago. If those beliefs are true, then it means that men have been citified for about three tenths of a percent of their existence which makes it seem like a pretty recent thing. When compared to the probable duration of other phases through which the race has passed, city life hasn't yet even qualified as a trend. In the time scale of human life, it may be nothing more than the quirky behavior of a few short generations. Given the unsustainable and irreversible nature of what we're doing with present technology, it's likely that city life will soon be lost in an overwhelming return (optimistically speaking) to the normal state of human existence. Perhaps a thousand years from now, no one will even remember us except as a rather bizarre creation legend told around the campfires late at night.

Of course, the consensus might be wrong. It may be that city technologies arose within the first few thousand years of the advent of man and have been periodically recurring ever since. Surely, a few thousand years is long enough for men to have developed them. You wonder at the lack of relics? Don't be ridiculous. Relics from only 4000 years ago are near the point of utter disappearance. How could anyone expect to find relics from a city almost 2 million years in the past? Why would anyone but an idiot presume that the lack of such relics disproves the existence of the city? And, how better to account for those rare but tantalizing anomalies that sometimes float to the surface of legend, appear on the walls of caves, or end up among the "lunatic fringe" of artifacts that professional archaeologists so dearly love to condemn?⁴ And consider this. Perhaps we're looking for the wrong kind of relics. The present human form is rather poorly suited for survival in the wild. A mere 5000 years is far, far too short a time for such evolutionary adaptation to have occurred. Perhaps we ourselves are the most convincing relics of nearly 2 million years of city life.

Or, perhaps the consensus is correct after all. Perhaps the first cities did arise a mere 5000 years ago and the human race really has spent 99.8% of its history obeying the call of the wild. In that case, this new style of living might well be viewed as a rite of passage. When applied to an individual, a rite of passage is a thing that presages the onset of maturity. In cultures which take them seriously, a rite of passage can be a thing that must be not only endured but also survived. If this is a rite of passage that we're experiencing, then it's one of the kind that must be survived. The most superficial survey of past known societies is proof enough that human society is fragile. The present accumulation of unsustainable and irreversible situations in the world, and our technological ability to sustain them far beyond the breaking points of previous known societies, is a harbinger of approaching failure more global than any in recorded history. It's a situation that cannot be much longer ignored. Shortly, probably within our own lifetimes, our species must confront its rite of passage. No one can deny that the tools of success are available. We have everything

4 Erich Von Däniken is an interesting example. See the references section.

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that we need to succeed except humility and our lack of it contaminates with greed, arrogance, and cruelty most of what we accomplish.

The result of this hypothetical rite of passage, if we can survive it, is obvious. We've shown our potential by the heroism that we've performed, the ideals that we've attempted, and the beauty that we've created but the brutality of the beast haunts our every endeavor. We have a lot to learn yet if we are to learn humility and move another step toward civilization.

o o O o o

For those of you who've never heard about the Robins,
here's the song, as sung to me by my grandmother.

Poor Babes In The Woods

—author unknown

Oh, don't you remember a long time ago,
Two poor little babes, their names I don't know,
Went strolling away on a bright summers day
And were lost in the woods, I've heard people say.

And when it was night, so sad was their plight!
The sun had gone down and the stars gave no light.
They sobbed and they sighed and most bitterly cried.
Poor babes in the woods, poor babes in the woods.

And when they were dead, the Robins so red
Brought strawberry leaves and over them spread,
And sang them a song the whole day long.
Poor babes in the woods, poor babes in the woods!

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[The Lone Raver Writes Again.](#)

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