The Ethical Challenge of Our Time: Reflections on History, Ideas, and Action

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In the realm of lived experience, there is no such thing as ethics and morality—at least not as an analytically distinct and hermetically isolated discourse. Ethical and moral discourse in lived experience is always a fabric with history, biography, aesthetics, social and political institutions, and so on. There is, then, something artificial about any discussion of the state of ethics that does not at least aspire to make sense of this complex tangle of factors. Even lay people tell stories of how all of these factors tie together, and they fix their own lives and identities within them.

What are these narratives? While not mutually exclusive, there are at least two popular and opposing narrative streams concerning the moral life. These narratives have a long history in the West, though they have been told with different specifics by different generations. These are important for many reasons but not least because they form a backdrop for much of the academic discussion of the moral life today.

The narrative of liberation begins with a picture of the past in which social life was morally homogeneous. This uniformity was sanctioned by convention and enforced by a network of ruling institutions—religious, familial, and political—that not only stood guard over the boundaries of behavioral propriety but also, in more subtle ways, reinforced the threshold of shame. The moral life of more traditional societies, then, was socially, behaviorally, and psychologically domineering toward the majority, and its cruelty toward those few who, for whatever reason, actually violated its strictures was often hard, merciless, and vindictive. The challenge to the authority of these institutions and their leaders has, in recent generations, led to a loosening up of their moral codes, providing greater personal autonomy in how to live life, a protection of individual liberties, and, at the psychological level, a liberation from guilt. The excesses of liberty in the range of illicit behavior is a problem—but a problem best dealt with through the enactment and enforcement of rules, regulations, and principles.

The narrative of decline begins with much the same picture of the past, and
yet the milieu of moral homogeneity in traditional cultures, while rooted in convention, was enforced by the consensus of conscious free agents who enjoyed the ordered liberty that a strong moral code and the character types that derived from it provided. The challenge to the moral authority of the leading social institutions has been the initiative of activists and extremists on the margins of the social order. Their unlikely but remarkable success may have provided more autonomy for people, but it also generated a permissiveness in the culture that has led to the derision of wholesome virtues, a contempt toward social authority and the order it provided, and untold human costs measured in the ruin of marriages, the breakdown of families, the increase in crime and violence, and a range of socially irresponsible and destructive behaviors. Though rules and regulations have their place in addressing these issues, the decline in moral behavior is best addressed through the renewal of character—the cultivation of constraints internal to consciousness.

There may be some truth in both of these narratives, but what makes them difficult to reconcile is that each is surrounded by a mythic quality, which means that in popular consciousness they are more powerful than historical evidence would allow. These myths are also linked to different and competing political agendas with extensive institutional support in special interest groups and political parties. As such, the discourse on the state of ethics in our society is, at best, clouded from the start.

It is true that all narratives are, in ways, *ex post facto* readings of history and experience. These are no different. Both are inadequate accounts of what are, in fact, complex changes that are deeply rooted in the structures of late modernity. My purpose this afternoon is not so much to affirm or critique one or the other but, if anything, to do an end run around both narratives by offering a more complex reading of the state of ethics and by offering some considerations as to what might be done to enhance ethical standards, sensitivity, and practice. In the end, this might be an alternative narrative, but I really don’t intend it to be anything so elaborate or grand. I really just want to introduce some new elements to the picture.

The agenda consists of four parts. All cultures are formed in a trialectic between structures, ideas, and the actions of institutions and individuals. So let me make my case by addressing each of these factors. I’ll first consider some structural factors at work in our historical moment. I’ll then reflect on changes in the world of ideas and how they relate to those structural factors. Next, I’ll consider the strategies we’ve devised for addressing these challenges and the ways these strategies tend to prove problematic. Finally, I’ll bring my remarks to a close by looking at some things that I hope might help us think more carefully and constructively about the present challenges.
I. Structural Factors: Deinstitutionalization and Subjectivization

What scholars call modernity—early, high, and late—is a complex knot of structures, processes, and ideas that defy easy summary. Over its duration, modernity has been certainly characterized by technological innovation, scientific discovery, institutional differentiation, bureaucratic rationalization, and cultural pluralism, which follow from urbanization, the proliferation of the media of mass communications, as well as social geographic mobility, among other things. The net effect of the intense convergence of these uniquely modern processes is what the German social theorist Arnold Gehlen has described as “deinstitutionalization.” This is a very important concept, and to understand it one must begin with Gehlen’s general theory of institutions.

The basis of Gehlen’s theory of institutions is in an understanding of the biological constitution of the human animal. Biologists have shown that in relation to the rest of the animal world, the human organism is incomplete at birth; human beings are, in short, instinctually deprived. What this means is that there is no biologically grounded structure through which humans may channel their externalizing energies, nor is there a single environment to which the human organism must become accustomed. Unlike the rest of the animal world, then, the human experience at birth is open and unchanneled.

The problem is that this is biologically, and therefore psychologically, intolerable. Human beings can’t survive in these circumstances.

Institutions, then, are human constructions that provide for human beings what their biology does not. They function like instincts in that they pattern individual conduct and social relationship in a habitual and socially predictable manner. Not only do they establish behavior with a pattern, but institutions also provide human experience at the cognitive level with an intelligibility and a sense of continuity. By living within the well-defined parameters of a matrix of such institutions, humans don’t have to reflect on their actions—they can take their social world for granted. What this means is that institutions exist and operate as a stable background to human experience.

But this is not all of human experience. Against this background is a foreground—a zone of life in which the individual reflects, ponders, and makes choices. The former provides the structural context for the latter.¹

Deinstitutionalization occurs when an aspect of culture is transferred from the background to the foreground. Thus, for instance, marriage is deinstitutionalized when the normative codes regulating a specific type of social arrangement lose their plausibility, and thus the structure and functioning of the nuptial relationship become open ended—a matter of choice.
According to Gehlen, one of the most important aspects of modernity is that the foreground of choice is growing and the background of stable institutional patterns is receding. Modernity is characterized by an unprecedented degree of deinstitutionalization. Yet the processes of deinstitutionalization take place mainly in the private sphere of personal and family life and other primary relationships. The areas of child rearing, courtship, marriage, sexuality, vocation, religious belief and practice, consuming patterns, leisure, and the basic norms that guide social behavior and social exchange are, in advanced industrial countries, all radically deinstitutionalized.²

This is not the end of the story. According to Gehlen, there is a corollary process to deinstitutionalization that he calls “subjectivization.” When, over the course of time, stable institutional routines and habits of life are rendered implausible or are no longer taken for granted, individuals must choose how to live. Choosing means a necessarily turning inward to the realm of subjectivity where one must continuously reflect, ponder, and probe their newfound choices. Personal autonomy (i.e., doing one’s own thing in life), then, is not simply a social fashion but rather a structural necessity. (Helmut Schelsky described this phenomenon as “permanent-reflectiveness”—permanent because it is intrinsic to modernity.)

Let me illustrate with the case of identity. In more archaic societies, identities were assigned at birth and were socially reinforced by religion, family vocation, status and wealth, gender, etc., throughout the course of the individual’s biography. One could take one’s identity for granted. With the deinstitutionalization of identity, the question of personal identity shifted to the foreground of choice. Yet choosing whom one is presupposes a turning inward to one’s subjectivity. Hence the self becomes a territory without boundaries, there to be explored, probed, excavated, and charted. The weakening of institutional supports for identity makes the territory liable to continual change.

II. Ideational Factors: Therapeutic/Utilitarian Individualism and the Legacy of Romantic Modernism

Deinstitutionalization and subjectivization are structural features of the modern and late modern world. As such, the individual has little or no control over them. But this is not the only dynamic at play. Culture, as I say, is formed in a trialectic between structure, ideas, and action. So let’s move to the second part—the realm of ideation.

Here my interest turns to one of the, if not the most, prominent strains of thought coming out of the Enlightenment—romantic modernism. Romantic modernism was and is a movement within high culture. It is a complex phenomenon to be sure. It is a philosophy, an aesthetic, an ethic, and even a mythic ideal all at the same time. Its roots, as I say,
trace to certain streams of Enlightenment thought, and through the 19th century it found expression in such wide-ranging movements as transcendentalism, abstract impressionism, and the literature of Arnold, Whitman, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Hawthorne, and Melville. In the 20th century the same impulse has found a voice in liberal religious thought, the Beat movement, humanistic psychotherapy, and intellectual fashions as existentialism, liberation theologies, and post-structuralism.

In their most basic contours, the philosophy and literature of romantic modernism derived from traditional theology. In effect, the movement sought to sustain the inherited cultural order of Christianity without its dogmatic understructure and the moral and aesthetic ideals of traditional faith without their creedal foundations. In an age dominated by speculative rationality and progressive humanism, orthodox theology was no longer tenable. Among the urban, well-educated classes, traditional dogma and its assorted pieties had to be abandoned.

Yet the moral ideals that Christendom had bequeathed to the late 18th and 19th centuries—such ideals as benevolence, civility, and justice—all retained a deep and profound existential relevance. The task, then, was to reconstitute moral philosophy to make it intellectually acceptable as well as emotionally and spiritually fitting to the times.

To do this, the traditional Christian narrative and its central concepts were both demythologized and reconceived. There is a long and complex story here that I won’t go into. Let me just say that at the heart of this reconstitution of theology and moral philosophy was an attempt to relocate the source of moral value and significance. The earliest streams of romantic modernism aspired to establish moral significance in a high view of nature. Transcendentalists, for example, sought to ground their view in this way, as have certain streams of liberal theology. Because the person was part of the natural order, they could no longer entertain the notion that the self was inherently evil.

Traditional theological conceptions of human nature were turned inside out. The core of our being was not just benign; rather, each self was a “portal of the divine,” a natural repository of inborn qualities, capacities, and talents, not least of which was a disposition toward goodwill, kindheartedness, fair play, and so on. To cultivate good in the world, it was only necessary to encourage inborn dispositions and capabilities into their full maturation.

But for all of their efforts to establish metaphysical grounds for this view, its advocates could never move significantly beyond a persistent subjectivism. The early romanticists eventually abandoned their metaphysical aspirations and concluded instead that the only conceivable source of value and purpose was the
necessity of the individual self. In this light, neither nature nor any deity was the source of value but only the occasion for humankind to project it. Culture, and the order it provided, merely symbolized those self-generated values.

In principle, anything that repressed emotion, constricted individual autonomy, violated the individual’s expressive freedom, or challenged the individual’s personal interest undermined the development of the self’s natural endowments and capabilities. Its net effect would be to fashion a self that existed in opposition to its true and natural propensities. Repressed selves, in turn, would reproduce an oppressive social order. The goal, then, would be to liberate the individual from all of these constraints. Institutions still exist, of course, but their legitimacy now depends upon their capacity to accommodate the expressive and utilitarian needs of the individual. With this reorientation, not only would people be restored but also society itself would be renewed in the process.

In sum, romantic modernism is the cultural foundation for what Charles Taylor has called “the age of authenticity.” It has fostered a subjectivism marked by the optimistic assumptions about the inherent benevolence abiding in all people, the moral significance of the individual’s expressive needs, the absolute moral priority of the unhindered and unencumbered individual over the exigencies of the group, as well as its antipathy toward social convention and traditional institutions. This subjectivism provided a framework of literary, artistic, and intellectual legitimacy to the subjectivization already at work in the structure of modern life. It was also utterly compatible with and reinforced the other key stream of Enlightenment thought, utilitarianism, in at least two key respects: the autonomy of the self from all social encumbrances and the sovereignty of the self as the final arbiter of moral judgment.

III. Strategies of Moral Action—The Quest for Inclusiveness

The structural and the ideational are overlapping—they are very different spheres of reality, and thus they operate on very different dynamics. Yet they do share elective affinities; they share the same ideological structure. But here again, if culture is formed and sustained in a trialectic between structure, ideation, and agency, then how do our strategies of moral action fit into this situation?

My own research has not been on business ethics but rather on the moral formation of the young. I’ll focus my attention on this, recognizing that while informed by different streams of philosophical reasoning, there are significant points of overlap with other forms of moral and ethical education.

Perhaps the enduring subtext in the evolution of moral and ethical education in America, and its continuing story to the present, has been a quest for inclusiveness.
While the need to provide moral and ethical instruction has never been questioned, neither has the impulse to accommodate the ever-widening diversity of moral cultures in the modern world. Inclusion is a strategy for dealing with the challenge of expanding pluralism.

In the face of potentially contentious and disrupting differences, this strategy neutralizes the possibility of conflict, for, in the most practical sense, inclusion means that no one’s interests are neglected, no one is left out, and, therefore, no one is slighted, snubbed, or offended. One theorist captured the sum and substance of the quest when he stated that “certain moral values can be taught in school if the teaching is restricted to principles about which there is essentially no disagreement in our society.” This provision has become the unspoken imperative of all moral education—psychological, neoclassical, and communitarian.

Among the developmental and educational psychologists who have dominated the field since midcentury, the framework for an inclusive moral education derives from their theories of moral agency. Simply put, if moral dispositions are innate within all human beings, then the objective of moral pedagogy is to call out these dispositions into consciousness, particularly in the formative stages of childhood development. Within this strategy, the differences one finds in pedagogical approaches depend on whether one views these innate dispositions as essentially cognitive (or rational), affective (or emotional), or biological (or genetic).

Lawrence Kohlberg’s cognitive developmentalism, so influential in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was only the most audacious attempt to elucidate within this framework the universal characteristics of moral development. A “moral principle,” he argued, is “a mode of choosing which is universal, a rule of choosing which we want all people to adopt always in all situations.” In particular, the principle of justice “is always the same ideal form regardless of climate or culture.” Only by turning justice into an abstract universal ideal could Kohlberg insist that the teaching of it was “the only constitutionally legitimate form of moral education in the schools.”

But he has not been alone among the psychologists in his proclivity to systematize, rationalize, and universalize morality. Evolutionary psychology has, more recently, sought to do the same by demonstrating a universal basis of moral behavior in the biological constitution of the human animal. Among educational practitioners, an inclusive approach to moral education is also the aim to teach “a core of values which most Americans consider fundamental to the democratic system. . . . Justice, equality, fair play, consideration, and honesty are values most Americans accept.” What all of these approaches share in common is the assumption that what is truly “moral” or “just” is neither a matter of taste nor of dogma but rather
an intrinsic feature of the human psyche. Social, cultural, racial, and institutional differences among people exist, but they are largely irrelevant. What is relevant is that, as moral agents, people possess innate dispositions rooted in their psychological and emotional constitution, which make them morally equivalent in their potential for good or ill. In light of this fact, it is the task of moral education to “call out” these potentialities through pedagogic practices that are equally general and encompassing.

The imperative for an inclusive morality into which children will be socialized is equally unquestioned among the neo-traditionalist moral educators, except that they pursue inclusiveness not in psychology but in anthropology. Thus, when these educators affirm what C. S. Lewis called “the Tao,” they affirm moral principles found across all traditional cultures, principles for which there is no essential disagreement. Likewise, when they speak of their commitment to the “timeless” values of “the Judeo-Christian ethic,” they speak of values that are enduring across time—and, therefore, values that transcend contention.9

Among communitarians (as well as many neo-traditionalist educators) inclusiveness is explicitly sought not in psychology or anthropology but in sociology—in a social consensus that is continually rediscovered or forged anew as a social contract among various and dissimilar individuals. Needless to say, consensus values are values that are explicitly shared and affirmed—and, therefore, ones that generate no friction.

The chorus is repeated by the large host of educators charged with translating this mandate into practice. For instance, the former state superintendent of schools in California insisted that teachers instruct children in the common ethical convictions of the American people, the “ideals and standards we as a society hold to be worthy of praise and emulation.”10 The Character Counts! Coalition also insists that “there are some universal core values that can be taught”—values that are not identified with any single political or religious tradition.

These values are identified through panels, committees, commissions, departments of education, and so on. Virginia is fairly typical in the way it articulated the requirement of inclusiveness. There, the General Assembly listed “those core civic values and virtues which are efficacious to civilized society and are common to the diverse social, cultural, and religious groups of the Commonwealth.”12

And so it goes. In theory and practice, in law and in administrative policies, the quest for an inclusive morality that transcends all differences is common to all moral education strategies. As we have seen, all strategies—psychological, neoclassical, utilitarian, and communitarian—pursue it. It allows norms to be taught without them ever being controversial or contested.
And yet while the imperative of inclusiveness is beyond dispute, and while there are undeniable goods in pursuing inclusivity, it is not without cost.

IV. Problems with Our Strategies

The unintended consequence of inclusiveness in moral and ethical education is that it can be pursued only by emptying lived morality of its particularity—those “thick” normative meanings whose seriousness and authority are embedded within the social organization of distinct communities and the collective rituals and narratives that give them continuity over time. The net effect of this denial of particularity is to engage in some extraordinary evasions. Consider, for example, the treatment of moral exemplars in the psychological strategy. Though Kohlberg’s cognitive developmentalism is unique in the psychological strategy, his treatment of Martin Luther King, Jr., is typical. King is enshrined as the personification of a “just” human being. In Kohlberg’s model, he exemplified “stage six” moral reasoning: autonomous, conscience-oriented morality pointing toward universal principles of justice. Yet it is as though King’s race, southern heritage, generational moment, faith, and theological training—all the inconvenient particularities that bore on his leadership in the civil rights movement—were utterly incidental to his vision and his moral courage. They are simply disregarded.

Though the circumstances and issues are so different, it is certainly the same effort to evade the sticky problem of particularity that the psychological pedagogies avoid addressing the issues of abortion, gender, homosexuality, and the like. These moral matters simply cannot be addressed without getting into the particularities of moral commitment and the traditions and communities that ground those commitments. Knowledge of the cognitive and affective dimensions of moral agency just doesn’t provide the resources to address these matters. And so, for all practical purposes, these issues have been defined out of existence in this framework of moral education.

The neo-traditionalist strategy denies particularity as well but in its own way. When its advocates champion the “Tao” or the “Judeo-Christian ethic,” they champion an ethic that never existed in reality and now only exists as an ethical abstraction or political slogan.

Communitarians also diminish particularity with the same effect for the simple reason that the dominant school of communitarianism tends to equate its ideal of community with the liberal welfare state. In its political structures one finds the embodiment of the common good, and in its polity of equality and redistributive justice one finds the ideal of civic life. What we end up with is a manifestation of political consensus that permits the feeling of rootedness and connectedness but avoids the often provincial and exclusive
and authoritarian and messy practices of real communities.\textsuperscript{13}

While I haven’t studied this in any depth, the denial of particularity also seems to be a feature of the utilitarian strategies of moral and ethical reasoning one finds in business and medical ethics education.

The denial of particularity extends as well to the way moral educators respond to the “why” questions behind moral agency, the sanctions that undergird moral action. Why should one be good? Why should one tell the truth rather than lie? Why should one shun cruelty in favor of compassion? Why should one pursue fairness for others when one’s own interests are not served? Why should one care for those in need when everyone around is indifferent? These are natural questions to ask and not just by children. They point to the deep, long-standing questions at the foundations of moral philosophy. Far from abstract philosophical inquiry, these questions are implied every time we witness evil or cruelty or betrayal and we ask, “Why did they commit such a horrid act?” They arise just as often when we witness acts of great kindness or self-sacrifice and ask, “Where did such generosity come from?”

For the most part, moral educators want to believe that the virtues are self-evident goods that need no justification. As Michael Josephson of Character Counts! put it:

\textit{I suggest that it doesn’t really matter how we answer the question. No one seriously questions the virtue of virtues or doubts that honesty is better than dishonesty, fairness is better than unfairness, kindness is better than cruelty, and moral courage is superior to cowardice and expediency.}\textsuperscript{14}

The historical and empirical problem is that the reasons “why one should be good” are many. Their stubborn plurality signals just the kinds of irreducible differences that cannot be homogenized into an encompassing morality. In response to the questions “Why be good?” or “Why not be cruel?” a commitment to inclusiveness limits one to either the banalities of therapeutic or utilitarian reasoning or awkward silence.

In sum, the subtext of an inclusive moral and ethics education is not the absence of morality but rather the emptying of meaning and significance and authority from the morality that is advocated. The effort to affirm an inclusive morality reduces morality to the thinnest of platitudes, leaving it severed from the social, historical, and cultural encumbrances that make it concrete and ultimately compelling. Virtues are espoused as ungrounded generalities that can be found in various social organizations and cultural traditions but are not essentially linked to them. Deprived of anchoring in any normative community, this morality retains little authority beyond its own aesthetic appeal. In the same way, by
rendering the self either prior to or outside of community and its culture, contemporary moral education empties the self of any concrete social and metaphysical grounding.\(^{15}\)

The problem is that in human history there have never been “generic” values. Yet this is what contemporary strategies of moral action end up offering. But how is this really a problem? Why should anyone worry about the specifics—especially since we are so likely to disagree on them—as long as we’re united around the overall norms? Charles Taylor, who posed this question in his book *The Sources of the Self*, has suggested that it is the particularities that lead us to the sources of morality, the sources that sustain our commitment to goodness and fair play. The answers to these questions speak to higher purposes that take us beyond ourselves and that, in turn, make morality compelling. It is one thing to affirm general standards of goodness, he says, and quite another to be motivated by a strong understanding “that human beings are eminently *worth* helping or treating with justice, a sense of their dignity or value.”\(^{16}\) High ethical standards, Taylor has argued, require strong sources. Without them, there is little imperative and no direction for moral action.

Take as an example the value of empathy. For many moral educators, it is our capacity to imagine ourselves in the situation of others that is the source of our moral sentiments. The pedagogic principle is that children learn from those with whom they are empathetic the array of values that will constitute their moral universe. In this, empathy becomes the foundation of an ethical life. But empathy has an even more specific significance. It is through our capacity to imagine the suffering of others, even those in circumstances that are utterly alien to us, that we learn compassion and mercy.

The argument cannot and should not be dismissed. Empathy indeed serves as an aid to understanding and a motive to enacting justice. But when it is decontextualized—lifted out of the framework of embedded habits and moral traditions—empathy can become indiscriminate. Thus, in a materialistic and hedonistic culture, empathy may lead a child to experience nothing more significant than the anguish of another child who didn’t receive all the Christmas presents she wanted or of the boy whose parents actually require him to do chores on Saturday morning when all of his friends are playing. Detached from the concrete habits and ideals that ground particular moral communities, empathy also would not enable a person to discriminate among competing kinds of suffering. With whom do we stand in solidarity, offering our energy and resources? Somalian refugees? Upper middle class women who are victims of workplace discrimination? Sexually abused children? Spotted owls in endangered habitats? Gun owners who fear their rights are threatened? Then too, how is empathy experienced in daily life?
In an age saturated with media accounts of tragedy and suffering, few stories produce anything more than a fleeting emotion, often enough the relief that we were spared the misfortune ourselves. Empathy, on its own, simply does not lead to consistent, enduring, or discriminating moral commitments.\textsuperscript{17}

When moral rules and selves are abstracted from the normative traditions that give them substance and the social context that makes them concrete, “values” become little more than sentiments, moral judgments, or expressions of individual preference. In such a framework, the defining moral action is the capacity of the individual to choose as he or she sees fit. The individual is capable of making commitments, of course, but these commitments need not be binding. One can engage, but one always retains “the right of withdrawal.” When notions of the “good” or of any other ideal have their basis within the self, these ideals are incapable of sustaining binding obligations precisely because the highest normative ideal, trumping all others, is the ideal of an individual free to move among multiple attachments. And the merit of those attachments is measured by the degree to which they facilitate personal well-being or self-interest. Unanchored as they are to anything concrete outside of the self, the values or virtues or principles encouraged by the leading strategies of ethics education provide meager resources at best for sustaining and supporting “our far-reaching moral commitments to benevolence and justice.”\textsuperscript{18}

When moral and ethical discourse are taken out of the particularity of the moral community—the social networks and rituals that define its practice, the weltanschauung that gives it significance and coherence, and the communal narrative that forms its memory—both the self and the ethical ideals it seeks to inculcate operate in a void. Filling the void, in part, is a system of rules, laws, procedures, principles, and entitlements designed to ensure due process among individuals and groups who are assumed to be maximizing their interests. A myriad of good intentions stand behind each system of compliance, each federal and state regulation, and each court order. But here too there are unintended consequences. In such an environment, the very ideas of “developing values,” “cultivating character,” or generating “good” human beings are difficult to imagine, much less realize.

**Conclusion—Where Structure, Ideation, and Agency Come Together**

So there you have it. The structural realities built into the modern world, the major cultural movements within scholarship and aesthetics, and the leading moral strategies we have developed to address the problems we face all reinforce each other. What does this mean?

It means that the narrative I have tried to unpack here is fundamentally different from the dominant narratives
about morality in American culture today. The story I have tried to tell is not so much a story of liberation, though liberation is clearly something we all enjoy. Nor is it a story of decline, though one finds evidence of clearly moral corruption, decadence, deterioration, and so on everywhere. The story I have tried to unpack is a story in two parts. First, it is a story of change in the moral life of a society—change operating along historical and sociological dynamics that are largely out of our control. And yet it is also a story of tragedy—of how the very strategies we invent to address this change fail to address the root problems because they are of a fabric with those problems. As Einstein once put it, you can’t solve a problem within the paradigm that created that problem in the first place.

So what do we know?

Well, we know that there is no reversal of history or simple recovery of older virtues. Here traditionalists long for something that they cannot have.

We also know that our strategies of moral and ethical action are utterly captive to the society in which they exist; they are part and parcel of the very problems we want to solve. In this regard it is clear that even in their diversity and their oppositions, our strategies are more a story about the legitimation of American culture than they are a story about its transformation.

We also know that consistent moral and ethical action outside of a lived community, the entanglements of complex social relationships, and their shared story is difficult if not impossible.

What can be done?

It seems to me that the central question that animates this conference and the Wheatley Institution is not “Is ethics in decline and what can we do about it?” but rather “How do moral cultures—in their totality—change and what, if anything, might people do to influence that change in ways that secure genuine benevolence and genuine justice in a highly diverse society?” This will entail a basic rethinking of our current understanding of the relationship between morality, moral commitment, family, child rearing, public life, economic institutions, and democratic institutions and the ways to thicken our commitments in each. Strategies of moral pedagogy and ethical action will follow in turn. This rather large task—of rethinking the nature and complexity of relationships—is something that a new institute, such as the Wheatley Institution, can aspire to do.

Notes

1. Institutionalization occurs when an aspect of the foreground of human experience becomes habitualized and routinized so as to become a part of the background. Thus, for example, child rearing is institutionalized when random behavior of the parent toward the child becomes habituated in a society and then embedded in a normative (often moral) structure of the rules, codes, and procedures.
Institutionalization is complete when the rules and procedures guiding child-rearing practices become a feature of the society’s taken-for-granted experience.

2. The public sphere—the sphere of massive bureaucracies of government and law, business and commerce, labor, health care, communications, the military, and, oftentimes, religion—remains overly institutionalized along functionally rational grounds.


9. It is because there are “certain fundamental traits of character” (William J. Bennett, *American Thought,* “Moral Literacy and the Formation of Character,” *USA Today* 117, no. 2518 [July 1988]: 86) recognizable to most people that William Bennett could argue that his *Book of Virtues* would be “for everybody—all children, of all political and religious backgrounds” (Bennett, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993], 13).


12. Virginia General Assembly, *Elementary School Character Education Programs*, Senate Bill No. 817, adopted 7 April 1999; emphasis added; http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?991+ful+SB817ER2). The list is typical of what other state legislatures have endorsed: “(i) trustworthiness, including honesty, integrity, reliability, and loyalty; (ii) respect, including the precepts of the Golden Rule, tolerance, and courtesy; (iii) responsibility, including . . . accountability, diligence, perseverance, and self-control; (iv) fairness, including justice . . . and freedom from prejudice; (v) caring, including kindness, empathy, compassion, consideration, generosity, and charity; and (vi) citizenship, including . . . concern for the
common good, respect for authority and the law, and community-mindedness.”

13. The kinds of binding obligations typically rooted in the communal purposes of creedal communities, for example, make many Americans and most communitarians nervous, and so they are written off as “puritanical,” authoritarian, and extreme. Reluctant to affirm the underside of lived communities that often challenge received notions of liberal autonomy, it is easier to embrace a political ideal of community that does not. However one might explain this, community is championed more in theory than in reality, more as an ideal of liberal universalism than as the diverse relational structures that impose themselves upon us in everyday life.

The consequences are significant. What the defenders of the neo-traditionalist strategy advocate, in effect, are the forms and outcomes of traditional morality without the substance of particular religious sanctions. In the same way, what the advocates of the communitarian strategy champion is the moral integration of traditional community and the compact that makes that possible without the complex and often suffocating communal dependencies built into traditional community. A morality conceptualized without basic links to a living creed and a lived community means that the morality they espouse entails few if any psychic costs; it lacks the social and spiritual sanctions that can make morality binding on our conscience and behavior. It is true; advocates of these strategies do advocate “objective” morality. And yet without the grounding of particular creeds and communities, such morality can be advocated only as vacuous platitudes. (This is why we end up with “virtue of the month” programs and “ethical fitness” seminars.) Advocates of the neo-traditionalist and communitarian strategies want virtue, to be sure, but given the normative framework that they operate within, it ends up being, at its best, virtue on the cheap.

14. Michael Josephson, “‘Why Be Ethical?’ The Role of Principle, God and Self-Interest,” precourse reading materials, Character Counts! Character Development Seminars (Marina Del Rey, California: Josephson Institute, 1997), 212, as quoted in James Davison Hunter, The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 212. In the rare instances when moral educators address the question as a matter of theory, their answers are consistent with the model of inclusiveness they advocate. Why should we be good? The psychologically oriented moral educator answers that moral virtue is an intrinsic need, and when we satisfy this need by being kind or compassionate, we feel good about ourselves. The neoclassical educator will appeal to the consensus of history or anthropology and say that it is “natural” for us to conform to these standards. The communitarian educator will point to the social contract and say that we are better off when we share in the will
of the people. All these responses are as generalized as the morality they espouse. The aim is to offend no one and satisfy as many as possible.

15. Consider, for example, the word *character*. Within professional psychology and the therapeutic establishment, the concept of character was long ago rejected in favor of the concept of personality. The problem with *character* was that it bore ethical and metaphysical implications that professional psychology could not rationally explain or justify. Character, after all, is either good or bad, whereas personality is fascinating or boring, forceful or weak, attractive or unattractive. When character was disqualified as a legitimate way of thinking about the person, our concept of the self lost a measure of moral significance. Among the neoclassical and communitarian moral theorists, the ethical content of the self is precisely what they want a return to. They define themselves in principled opposition to the psychological regime on just this point. But they then go on to undermine the metaphysical, ethical, and social particularities that ground the self and make it concrete. The unwitting effect is to position moral agency within a social, historical, and cultural vacuum. Though the neoclassical and communitarian strategists would like it otherwise, they leave the self with no fixed reference points for constructing consistent moral codes. The individual is left, unwittingly, with few other resources than his or her mind and emotions as the moral justification for various actions.


17. Indeed, it can lead to just the opposite! As Bernard Williams observed, “If it is a mark of a man to have a conceptualized and fully conscious awareness of himself as one among others, aware that others have feelings like himself, this is a precondition not only of benevolence but . . . of cruelty as well” (Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* [New York: Harper and Row, 1972], 64).
