



CRACKING UP? Culture and the Displacement of Virtue

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Analysis Paper 4

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Peter Kurti
24 June 2018

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The Tyranny of Tolerance: Threats to Religious Liberty in Australia

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Introduction: What has happened to the culture?

Unease has been growing that something has changed for the worse in our culture. The change is perceptible but often defies precise description; yet it provokes this unease in many quarters because of a concern that the foundations upon which our common social life is lived have become unstable.

The kinds of change that have given rise to this general, pervasive anxiety about the health of the culture are familiar enough. They include the sense that the common bonds of civility that help to build mutual trust are under strain.

Norms and principles of social life that prevailed as recently as ten years ago have been upended, and for many — especially those with a conservative turn of mind — it feels as though this happened suddenly and unexpectedly. They are left with feelings of unease that the things they value are no longer of value to others.

The experience of cultural change that has occurred frequently provokes a widespread and persistent feeling among the more conservatively minded, that the warp and weft of the social fabric have altered — that the culture is broken — and in ways that are often discomfiting and unsettling.

This sense of cultural displacement is one of a number of important factors that help to account for the rise of nationalist-populism, and of the challenge it poses to mainstream politics. As Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin have argued, supporters of populists are driven by a desire to restore to the political agenda a broader set of principles and “to reassert cherished and rooted national identities over rootless and diffuse transnational ones.”¹

Defenders of such change say the culture is not broken at all, but is evolving in response to evolving sensitivities and understanding. And, indeed, an increased awareness of the need to combat behaviours that discriminate on the grounds of race or gender is one example of ‘good’ cultural change that has occurred during the past fifty or more years.

However, many are concerned that this cultural evolution has not stopped with the correction of aberrant behaviours. The assertion of rights has been weaponised and anti-discrimination laws are increasingly used to stifle the expression of conservative opinion rather than simply combat behaviour.² Nowhere is this more evident today than

in the tension between religious belief and sexual identity.

Take as an example the Morrison Government’s proposal to introduce a religious discrimination bill in the new parliament. Religious discrimination is to be made unlawful and a new position of Religious Freedom Commissioner in the Australian Human Rights Commission is to be created. This will establish religion as a protected category just as race and sexuality are already protected categories.

Will Labor support the passage of this bill through the parliament? It remains to be seen. Even though religious freedom featured prominently in the election campaign, the ALP is going to be wedged by the Greens. The Greens’ position is that any action to bolster religious freedom is nothing less than “a barefaced attempt to write a blank cheque to discriminate against LGBTI people.”³

This tension is one example of cultural shift, marked by two related features. The first feature of cultural shift is a move away from the communal — and with it, a diminishing civic readiness to live with difference — towards the individual, and a concomitant demand that threats posed by difference must be eradicated so that any behaviour deemed to harm individual dignity be proscribed by law.

The second feature of cultural shift is related to this emphasis on the sensitivities of the individual. Emphasis on the primacy of the individual away from the communal is evident in the eclipse of the moral language of virtue by the language of values. And this is important because, as this paper will outline, values language cannot successfully serve as a language of morals.

As a result of the cultivation of virtue having given way to the expression of values, when defenders of cultural change engage with those who resist it, their exchanges are invariably passionate and ardent because they are committed to a notion of the primacy of individual and personal dignity.

And the term ‘culture’, itself, is a term tossed about casually enough; but often without attention to what it is and why it matters. Given that ‘culture’ has a complex range of meanings, it is important to clarify what is actually meant when talking about culture before turning to the failure of virtue.

Culture and the Social Unconscious

The term 'culture' expresses a complex range of meanings. It can refer to a body of artistic work as well as to a process of intellectual and social development. 'Culture' can also refer to the whole set of principles and practices by which a community of individuals lives and works — whether in a household, a profession, an institution, or an organisation. The definition of culture given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* sets appropriately the context for the discussion:

The distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period. Hence: a society or group characterised by such customs.⁴

Culture, then, refers to the broad social and moral context within which a society functions. It is about a whole way of ordering life; and because it is a bit like the air we breathe, we can take culture for granted. But we ignore the health of the culture at our peril, and therefore need to be vigilant about safeguarding it.

This is why efforts to reform a culture inevitably require more than mere compliance with whatever regulatory and legal frameworks are imposed by governments. Keeping to the letter of the law is one thing; changing one's entire moral approach to standards of life is quite another.

According to literary critic Terry Eagleton, a significant component of culture that emerges from the *OED* definition is that of the social unconscious. He derives this from Wittgenstein's account of 'forms of life' in which a great deal is assumed or taken for granted. 'Culture' represents the collective summation of the customs, beliefs, and symbolic practices by which people live in a society.⁵

In Eagleton's view, this means culture can be both intensely self-aware, but also a good deal less so: "In [this] latter sense, it constitutes the invisible colour of everyday life, the taken-for-granted texture of workaday existence, too close to the eyeball to be fully objectified."⁶ Culture as "the invisible colour of everyday life" echoes Edmund Burke's notion of the resemblances, conformities, and sympathies that bind a community of common interests.

According to Burke, whom Eagleton thinks of as the finest exponent of the idea of culture as social consciousness, sensitivity to culture involves "studying the genius, the temper, the manners of the people, and adapting to them the laws that we establish."⁷ For Burke, culture is more fundamental than law or politics: it is "the matrix of all power, contract, authority, and legality. Culture is the sediment in which power settles and takes root."⁸

This account of culture as 'sediment' affords a priority to culture as the sphere of life within which all other forms of life and activity are pursued. It is to this extent that culture is a manifestation of the social unconscious. It is a view often expressed in the aphorism, favoured by conservatives, that *politics is downstream from culture*.

Burke's notion of a commonality of interests serves as a critical component of the social contract that enables the legitimate and constitutional exercise of governmental power and authority. The limits of what is possible in politics are described by the broader cultural context in which the activity of politics takes place. Healthy political authority can only flourish through a sensitivity to culture that can be understood as an intricate mesh of affinities and observances.

One area of the broader cultural context in which political activity takes place is the sphere comprised of the practices of trade and commerce, the expression of public opinion, the work of the media, the administration of justice, and the liberty of the citizen. This sphere is often referred to as 'civil society'; the arena of social conduct, the health and character of which is governed by shared beliefs and behavioural norms. As described by political scientist Francis Fukuyama, civil society is "the realm of spontaneously created social structures separate from the state that underlie democratic political institutions."⁹

Civil society is constituted by what Fukuyama describes as "precursors and preconditions" lying at the deeper level of culture, which he defines as "a rational, ethical habit passed on through tradition."¹⁰ Civil society is, therefore, informed by that Burkean 'sediment' of culture in which it takes root; it is shaped, in turn, by the habits, decisions, and traditions of a people:

Culture, broadly understood, is the riverbed of politics, setting the course along which it flows. But that course is checked and channelled by wilful human activity — by building dams and canals, as it were.¹¹

The sediment of culture, however, comprises more than the rational and ethical dimensions of virtue. It embraces sentiments and emotions; such as feelings of reverence, attachment, and devotion that cannot necessarily be expressed in terms of reason. Therefore, to some extent, the sediment of culture is pre-linguistic and pre-rational; for it includes among its components the felt experiences of a people.¹²

However, in some respects, assumptions made about the consistency and uniformity of that riverbed of politics have been challenged by the emergence of 'cultural diversity' as a driver of political and social change.

Cultural diversity — with political manifestation in the form of multiculturalism — is a factor that can function as a shield to protect the practices and beliefs of minorities from the predations of the majority; but it is now wielded just as readily as a sword by, or on behalf of, minorities to enforce the acceptance of those practices and beliefs by the majority. Sometimes, the affirmation of those practices may contravene society's laws or norms, or both. One example of this is some of the practices and beliefs arising in Islam that affect the rights of women, such as the wearing of head coverings.¹³

Multi-cultures?

Australia's official policy of multiculturalism commenced in the 1970s during the Whitlam Government (1972-1975). It was intended to foster a spirit of respect and tolerance by addressing forms of social exclusion thought to have been experienced by migrants and their descendants arriving under the country's post-war immigration program. This policy approach of the 1970s was motivated by a well-intentioned desire to rid the country of what many considered to be the stain of the White Australia policy.

The White Australia policy was established in 1901 but dismantled in stages by the Menzies and Holt governments after the end of World War II between 1949 and 1966. In that period, programs of multi-ethnic migration were developed to encourage non-British and non-white immigration.

The *Migration Act 1966*, passed by the Holt government, effectively ended the White Australia policy by greatly increasing access of non-European migrants. Ten years later, the Whitlam government adopted measures to prevent race being considered a factor in shaping immigration policy, and passed the *Racial Discrimination Act* in 1975, making all forms of racially-based selection unlawful.¹⁴

However, no longer simply a response to diversity, multiculturalism has now become the means of regulating it. It does so by treating society as a collection of separate ethnic groups that are dependent upon state-managed responses to diversity.¹⁵ The origins of this latter development can be traced to that period of legal and social reform when, as political scientist Kenneth Minogue has

noted, "the doctrine of tolerance began to make claims about reality, and turned into the belief that all cultures are of equal value."¹⁶

In Minogue's opinion, these claims about reality have given rise to the imposition of what he describes as "a dictatorship of virtue imposed upon a previously free people."¹⁷ This determination to identify and defend the rights both of individuals and various self-identifying 'victim' groups has now hardened into an oppositional confrontation between competing groups, each of which tends to deny it has any obligations to any other group.

Multiculturalism challenges assumptions about the extent to which any single culture can be considered to be shared and held in common. As such, culture has become something of a contested arena in which factors of equality and power are considered to be both important and formative. As these factors have become 'weaponised', so the dictatorship of virtue has become far less tolerant of individual freedoms of speech, religion, and conscience when the exercise of those freedoms is deemed to offend or harm dignity. This mounting intolerance, characteristic of a fetish of diversity, poses a grave threat to the health of the culture.¹⁸

Notwithstanding the questions that multiculturalism raises about the existence of a multiplicity of cultures coexisting within a society, the term 'culture' nonetheless is still able to convey a sense of the depth of the soil within which the diverse convictions, beliefs, and practices common to a society are rooted.

Indeed, as anthropologist Adam Kuper has argued, the differences between people in a given society arise from what is shared; and what is shared depends on our inter-relationships. In emphasising this point, Kuper quotes Claude Levi-Strauss' dictum that: "Diversity is less a function of the isolation of groups than of the relationships which unite them."¹⁹

Uncertainty about the strength or resilience of the relationships that bind us in the diversity of our common life explains current concerns about the direction Australia's culture is taking. This sense of cultural de-alignment, spreading rapidly now through Australian institutions such as universities and commercial corporations, serves only to heighten concerns that the fabric of civil society, — and in turn, the health of our democracy — is fragmenting.²⁰

Culture and Democracy

Recall that culture is the context within which any particular social form of life emerges and grows. However, the social form with which this discussion is concerned is specifically that of a liberal democracy.

In broad terms, 'democracy' can be understood as referring to a method of collective decision-making in which all participants in that process enjoy equal status. A 'liberal' democracy is one that promotes liberty by encouraging the active political participation of citizens by means of voting; and where the rule of law and the exercise of established freedoms serve as limits to the scope of government.²¹ According to political scientist Robert Audi, liberal democracy is characterised by two fundamental commitments.

First, there is a commitment to the freedom of citizens, upheld both by the rule of law and by obligations assumed under international treaties and conventions. Hence, democracy is characterised as *liberal*. Second, there is a commitment to the political *equality* of those citizens, which is commonly expressed in the practice of according one vote to one person. Thus, the autonomy and the political rights of citizens are to be respected in a liberal democracy:

A vote can represent a citizen's political will only if it is autonomous. This entails that it is not only uncoerced but also free of the kinds of manipulation and rights violations that would prevent its appropriately representing the values of the voter.²²

A society comprised of participants who enjoy both freedom and equality will be marked by diversity of belief, ideology, and morality. Hence, when the collective arrives at a decision, it is likely that the views of some will prevail and the views of others will not. Differences of morality and worldview can thereby pose a significant challenge for the life of a liberal, multicultural society.

How might this challenge of diversity best be met? One response is to hold that in a plural democracy, where different sets of values and different lives can combine in many varied ways, it is never possible to

justify the assertion of one set of moral principles over another. This view holds that the justifiability of moral values is always relative and there are no universal normative standards. Moral judgment is, accordingly, always relative both to culture and to circumstance.

For critics such as Eagleton, however, cultural relativism is "a vastly implausible position" that must be rejected. Cultural relativism holds that any idea that human existence rests upon universal foundations is illusory and that it is culture, itself, that is foundational. Yet Eagleton also argues that culture is not foundational, either:

To see everything as relative to culture is to turn culture itself into an absolute. It is now culture that one cannot dig beneath, as it used to be God or nature or the self. Culture is not identical with our nature, as the culturalists claim; rather it is *of our nature*. [Italics in original]²³

Eagleton is surely correct that human nature is prior to culture, and that culture gives expression to — or perhaps *emerges from* — human nature. If human nature is accepted as foundational for culture, the expressions of different beliefs and practices encountered in a multicultural society characterised by diversity must not be mistaken for the co-existence of different cultures. For critics such as Eagleton, therefore, "multicultural diversity" must rest upon a presumed shared foundation that underpins such diversity of expression.

Eagleton seems to think of this shared foundation as a kind of human universal into which specific attributes of different cultures are absorbed. However, as the bonds of civil society weaken, and the claims of one group are asserted against those of another, presumptions about the existence of such a shared, universal foundation weaken and falter. This is what gives rise to apprehension about the capacity of a broader (and deeper) culture to be a valid expression of a human universal.

Culture and Moral Authority

One commentator who uttered prescient warnings about the weakening of a shared foundation and its impact on culture is sociologist Philip Rieff. For Rieff, culture has a *moral* component, in that it describes the moral demands that inform and shape human behaviour. Rieff understands culture to be based on a shared vision of ideal moral behaviour, especially the kinds of behaviour that are forbidden or taboo.

Many activities and behaviours are possible for human beings; but according to Rieff, it is culture that imposes the restraints on individual behaviour necessary for upholding moral and social norms. Without these restraints, human beings would slip into what Rieff describes, poetically, as the "abyss of possibility."²⁴ Rieff argues it is culture that allows human beings to acquire a sense of meaning and

purpose, an argument noted by historian of ideas, Jerry Muller:

By attaching the self to some larger set of shared goals, and by requiring that man's [sic] asocial or evil urges be repressed or redirected towards higher, ultimate purposes, culture provides individual purpose and collective cohesion.²⁵

The set of shared goals essential for a diverse, pluralist society, has been described by historian John Hirst as "the bedrock principles." According to Hirst, these principles are to "guide our society and allow us to resolve our differences and to live with those differences which cannot and should not be resolved."²⁶

The process by which these bedrock principles, together with a sense of purpose and cohesion, are internalized by the individual is *education*. The family was considered by Rieff to be the most important educational institution for instilling cultural awareness; but more formal education institutions, such as schools and universities —and the intellectuals who staff them — also have an essential role in developing in children and young people an awareness of the moral limitations of possibility.

Muller notes Rieff's warning that: "where intellectuals regard their mission primarily as the opening up of possibilities rather than recalling the reasons why possibilities ought to be foreclosed, they pave the way for barbarism."²⁷ In other words, without a moral framework for deciding which possibilities it is appropriate to pursue, the individual runs the risk of choosing any possibility that is open. For Rieff, to choose like this is to tumble into the limitlessness of the abyss.

Rieff's particular contribution to the discussion about concerns for the development — or deterioration — of culture emerges from his detailed criticism of Freudian psychoanalysis and the consequent emergence of what he describes as "the culture of the therapeutic."

In Rieff's view, psychoanalysis has contributed to the erosion of inherited cultural norms and helped create a human being committed solely to the cultivation and tending of the inner life. As Muller explains, Rieff was critical of psychoanalysis because in retaining an openness to as many options for living as possible, the 'therapeutic' type is thereby schooled against commitments that are binding or permanent:

The bottom line of every social contract was the escape clause. This applied not only to personal commitments but to cultural or intellectual commitments as well. Commitment itself was viewed as a form of therapeutic self-enhancement, with each commitment to be abandoned when self-enhancement diminished.²⁸

Commitments liable to be abandoned include religious and moral precepts inculcated by family, school, and community. The abandonment of commitment, in turn, leads to a further weakening of a shared moral

sensibility, and the consequent questioning of other forms of restraint and authority. As Muller notes, Rieff attributes much responsibility for these developments to the activities of intellectuals:

Abandoning their traditional role of articulating the necessity of the repression of desire for the sake of communal purposes and higher authority, intellectuals [are] increasingly devoted to demonstrating the arbitrariness of all restraints and authority.²⁹

In many ways, Rieff's warnings about the emergence of the 'therapeutic' individual who is committed to little more than his own self-enhancement have proved prescient. Reasoned argument has, indeed, given way to an emotivist preoccupation with the individual's own feelings and experiences; and intellectual elites have been in the vanguard of this development.

One factor contributing to the weakening of community cohesion has been the eclipse of religious and moral codes of conduct that provided authoritative boundaries of restraint and self-control. The quest for the salvation of the soul has given way to a yearning for fulfilment of the self that stands apart from communities bound together by common beliefs.

In weighing the prescience of Rieff's analysis, sociologist Lauren Langman laments the prevalence of hedonism in contemporary culture — what he describes as "the amusement society" — and regrets what he considers the unrestrained pursuit of "feeling good":

In our current 'amusement society', an essential moment of a 'therapeutic culture' oriented to feeling good, we see that gratifying images have supplanted complex thought, that political and intellectual discourse now consists of sound bites, sight bites, jingles and platitudes.³⁰

Rieff sounded early warnings both about the imminent deterioration of culture — marked by a heightened priority given to the autonomous preferences and experiences of the individual — and also about the weakening of the rational and emotional bonds and obligations arising in community that bind members of a society together.

Just such changes in culture are evident in contemporary western societies like Australia, where there is an evident shift in emphasis away from the communal — as represented by a general commitment to a society's bedrock principles and a willingness to live with difference — towards the individual; with the concomitant demand, asserted in terms of the politics of identity, for the imposition of restrictions on any speech or conduct alleged to diminish recognition and respect.

This shift is especially apparent in the way the personal has taken primacy over the communal, and in the way the cultivation of virtue has given way to the expression of values.

From Virtues to Values

Whether referring to the classical virtues of the Ancients, or the theological virtues of the Christian era, the concept of virtue has functioned as the bedrock for the good life of individuals and the well-being of the state.

The 'cardinal' virtues celebrated by Aristotle were: wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage. They were supplemented by prudence, magnanimity, munificence, liberality, and gentleness. The 'theological' virtues are: faith, hope, and charity.

Virtues are object moral norms that are both shared and personal. They are shared because there is general agreement about what the virtues are and what they represent; and they are personal because once an individual knows what the virtues are, they can make personal evaluation of about how they stand in relation to any particular virtue.

As morality became increasingly relativised and subjectified in the 20th century, however, the language of 'virtues', which asserts a degree of objective authority based on a shared human nature, gave way to the language of 'values' as a moral language. For historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, this change in language from virtues to values meant the resolute character of moral claims, formerly afforded a sense of authority based on the idea of virtue, weakened:

One cannot say of virtues, as one can of values, that anyone's virtues are as good as anyone else's, or that everyone has a right to his [sic] own virtues. Only values can lay that claim to moral equality and neutrality.³¹

"Values" are assumed to refer to something that is objectively real or factual; they assert, however, only a subjective, aesthetic assessment of worth, the expression of personal preference, which is unverifiable by facts and without any basis in tradition or social consensus.

As such, values are simply emotional statements about personal beliefs, feelings or attitudes. They cannot be normative because it is impossible to erect any shared meaning on the foundation of something that is personal and subjective, a point well made by the Australian legal scholar, Iain Benson:

Since "values language" is, at best, ambiguous, and at worst, inherently relativistic, it is actually opposed to a language that could further notions of objective goodness and shared meanings. This is why it is the enemy of character, citizenship and culture all of which, in some part, depend on shared understandings to develop well.³²

It is because values are a subjective assessment of worth that they can impose no moral obligations on others — even though we may want them to mean something in a shared way. As the Canadian

philosopher, George Grant, has remarked, "The language of value is what is left once you have eliminated the idea that there are purposes that intrinsically belong to being."³³

And the problem is that what is left does not amount to much. This has serious implications for the way we think about virtues as determinative, authoritative standards of behaviour that express a shared moral purpose grounded in a common nature and supported by tradition and social consensus.

Whereas the language of virtues requires that we conform to what is obligatory and shared and good, the language of values leaves us with nothing about which we can agree. This is compounded by the fact that arguments about acceptable standards of civil behaviour are fuelled by emotion — that is, by *feelings* about one's own status and that of others.

The emotivism that drives confrontation undermines any sense of reciprocal obligation which undermines, in turn, a sense of shared belonging. But without such a sense of shared belonging, there can be none of the moral obligation essential for the effective recognition and upholding of rights.

Rights and obligations

As noted earlier, the drive to define and defend the rights of individuals was originally prompted by a determination to be inclusive. This was the motivation for reform of human rights law in Australia which has won legal protections against discrimination on the grounds of race, sexual orientation, gender, and disability.

Appeals to human rights entail the demand that universally valid standards of behaviour are always recognized, and that certain forms of behaviour are open to reasoned criticism and reform. As such, the defense of human rights and freedoms depends on a foundation of reason.

But those earlier reforms prompted by sound, moral motives have given way to conflict between those who advance the relative merits of varying claims; and as Paul Collier, an economist, has noted, "the resulting oppositional identities are lethal for generosity, trust, and co-operation" — all of which are essential for social cohesion.³⁴

If rights are to be asserted, they must always be tethered to a sense of obligations owed. A commitment to human rights is, after all, founded on certain widely accepted assumptions about human beings and the way they should live. As emotion has displaced reason, however, rights have turned into demands for acceptance and affirmation. Reasoned thought will give way to hurt feelings; and emotion, rather than reason, serves as the new basis on which claims against others are asserted.

The displacement of reason by emotion is already having a significant impact on contemporary debates in this country about the balancing of different rights claims. For example, the right to recognition and affirmation claimed by transgendered people is now asserted with such vigour that the questioning of transgenderism is both problematic and tendentious.³⁵ Restrictions such as this pose a serious threat to the fundamental right to freedom of speech — even on a university campus, where the open enquiry, assumed to be a feature of academic discourse is now constrained.³⁶

Questions about the right to religious liberty were raised during the debate about same-sex marriage: would those with a faith-based objection to same-sex marriage be compelled either to endorse or to conduct marriage ceremonies that were contrary to the tenets of faith?

Notwithstanding a review of religious freedom led by Philip Ruddock, a Liberal politician and former Attorney-General, the Coalition has yet to implement any reforms to uphold religious liberty. However, legislated protections are expected to be in place by the end of 2019. In the absence of action by the government, however, religious believers have been understandably concerned that the advance of some rights — especially concerning sexual orientation — will continue to threaten the free exercise of religion in Australia.³⁷

Believers base their calls to protect religious liberty on their reasoned understanding of what constitutes a good society in which the rights of all citizens enjoy equal respect under the law. But their appeal to reason is likely to fail, as our fixed points of meaning, based on reason, are being replaced by emotion.

Thus, religious institutions currently campaigning for legal protection against religious discrimination are likely to find that the ground of reason upon which they were confidently building their arguments has shifted. However, failing to notice this tectonic movement, the campaigners will continue to build; but like the foolish man, they will be building on sand.

Reasoned discourse about rights and obligations becomes impossible if we discard the language of virtues and resort to values language. Rights lie beyond mere choice and preference, a point made well by Iain Benson:

If we believe moral beliefs to be relative, then we cannot have a commitment to 'justice' shared by all global communities and we would not be able to subscribe to the main concepts in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). These are not 'universal values' because there are, in fact, no such things. 'Values language' rejects the idea of shared moral goods as essential and necessary.³⁸

The rejection of 'shared moral goods' takes us very far from the Burkean understanding of culture as the sediment in which the institutions of civil society are rooted. The shift from virtues to values also removes us far from the notion that culture is a habit — or series of habits — passed from one generation to another, as advanced by Fukuyama.

The series of habits broadly comprising Western culture were at one time committed to upholding the principal rights and freedoms enjoyed by all citizens as the mark of a liberal democracy. Increasingly, however, those rights have been displaced in the name of diversity. Liberties enjoyed equally by all have been subverted in the pursuit of protections for the dignity, emotions, and feelings of a few.

Culture after Virtue?

Once values displace virtues, the idea of a shared morality soon loses any coherence or meaning — even in the face of authoritarian assertions that such a shared morality exists. Claims made using the language of morality purport, of course, to go beyond the expression of personal preference and to appeal to a standard that transcends personal preference and experience.

But while the language of morality may continue in use in the age of emotion, moral claims made using that language will mean something quite different because they do not, in fact, refer to virtues at all; rather, they refer to values. Thus, the statement that 'This is good or bad' can mean no more than 'This is what I choose to approve or disapprove.'

A statement that merely expresses a personal choice may certainly be passed off — and often is — as a statement of objective truth binding on all members of society. Although that statement may come to have legal force, it can have no inherent moral force, despite protestations to the contrary by the proponents of values.

Appeal to a transcendent, authoritative standard can make sense only within a broader community in which such standards are both acknowledged *and* shared. In some societies, the common moral authority might be religious; but a society could accept a common moral authority without that authority taking a religious form. The extent to which such standards are either acknowledged or shared in today's culture is, however, very uncertain.

Once virtues give way to values, and reason to emotion, it is not just common standards of behaviour that quickly erode. Without a broad consensus about the way things are done or the rules to be followed, the very language we use in civil and moral discourse begins to fragment and, soon enough, loses its meaning. It was on this basis that philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre observed some fifty years ago — with great prescience — that the notion of moral authority was no longer viable:

For the notion of authority can only find application in a community in which there is an agreed way of doing things, according to accepted rules. An agreed right way of doing

things is logically prior to the acceptance of authority as to how to do things. Unless there is an established and shared right way of doing things, so that we have social agreement on how to follow the rules and legislate about them, the notion of authority in morals is empty.³⁹

The nature of contemporary discourse in the public square, concerning such topics as those identified earlier, suggests MacIntyre was correct in pronouncing the non-viability of the notion of a common authority. If so, the notion of culture as a series of universal, transmissible, collective customs, beliefs, and sympathies is no longer viable either.

Politics, conservatism, and the ‘culture wars’

Concern about the viability of culture as a series of transmissible customs has had a serious impact on the political life of Australia; as a gulf widens between those on either side of the political divide. It is certain to affect the sphere of practices and behaviours, and the realm of contractual and voluntary relationships that comprise civil society. And this, in turn, is going to have — some would say is *already* having — a profound impact on our long-term capacity to bind into a cohesive whole the variegated communities and individuals that, together, have forged Australia into a prosperous, integrated, and multicultural society.

However, the conduct of public debate has been coarsening steadily, and the tone of political exchange has become shriller as arguments about energy, climate, refugees, and agriculture increasingly make appeals to personal feelings of grievance, guilt, and shame — rather than to reason, evidence, and duty.

The implications of this corrosion have been especially pressing for the centre-Right, conservative side of politics in Australia. There is a concern, voiced most notably and forcibly by Australian journalist Paul Kelly, that conservatism in Australia appears to have lost the capacity to articulate clearly the key moral principles undergirding conservative policy. This loss has occurred at a time of heightened moralism in politics on the part of those on the progressive Left.

Kelly argues that conservatives’ reticence about the moral dimension of policy, and consistent failure to bind together issues of morality and politics, has led to them struggling, over a period of a decade or more, effectively to shape public opinion. In this failure,

conservatives have missed the changing spirit of the times — the *zeitgeist*.

The political impact of the *zeitgeist* cannot be missed. There is nothing as vulnerable as an idea targeted by the progressive forces; witness traditional marriage, coal, and tax cuts for corporates. And there is nothing so resilient as a failed idea to which the progressive class is attached; witness open borders, wage rises divorced from productivity, and government intervention as a superior allocation mechanism to markets.⁴⁰

Whether the issue is climate change, immigration, fiscal policy, gender identity, or freedom of speech, Kelly argued that the Left was skilful in coupling debate about policy to debate about morality. Wisdom accepted in an earlier age appeared, today, to be rejected; policy acceptable to an earlier generation of voters appeared to be ideologically unfashionable to a new one. Thus, consideration of key moral principles — such as equality, fairness, duty, responsibility, and compassion — were always integral to the formulation of policy on the Left.

It was feared that these developments would contribute to the detected long-term erosion of support at the ballot box for conservative governments deemed by the electorate to be unpersuasive, confused, and disconnected.

With the country preparing to go to the polls in a federal election in May 2019, Kelly was concerned that the advantage apparently enjoyed by those on the

Left of Australian politics was due, in large part, to an ability to frame every significant policy issue in clear and comprehensible terms that appeal to a sense of a collective morality.

Certainly, Kelly's warnings about a crisis facing Australian conservatism appeared to be borne out in successive opinion polls that predicted defeat for the Coalition in the 2019 federal election. In the event, fears about such a defeat were not realised, and the Coalition was returned to office with a majority, and more seats than it had before the election.

Commentators were continuing to pore over the Coalition's unexpected victory at the time of writing (June 2019). But a broad theme that emerged quickly was that the Australian Labor Party and its leadership had engaged in a degree of moral over-reach, exaggerating claims about lack of fairness and growing social and economic inequality. This argument was expressed succinctly in an editorial in *The Australian*:

Labor recklessly reprised class war, anti-market rhetoric, redistribution and big government. This is Australia in sepia, clueless, in defeat. Labor disowned its proudest legacy [the Hawke-Keating reforms of the 1990s] by insisting on a story of national failure. That didn't sit well with a people whose material living standards have doubled in the past 50 years.⁴¹

Of course, it remains to be seen how the Coalition's victory at the polls in May 2019 will affect this admittedly bleak scenario. The forces of identity politics have long been on the march in Australia; and many were expecting those forces to gain momentum under a Labor government. In preaching a transformative moral vision for the country, however, the political Left appears to have badly misjudged the character of the Australian voter.

For example, that ideological, moral vision ridiculed and dismissed the views of those 66 per cent of Australians who declared a religious affiliation in the last census. Had it been brought to fruition, it would have threatened to traduce the ethos of religious institutions by removing longstanding exemptions afforded under anti-discrimination laws. This would have prevented institutions such as schools, hospitals, and aged care facilities from upholding the tenets of their faith.

The election results also indicate that unease about the diminished role of moral language in the

articulation of centre-Right policy was misplaced. The apparent advantage that Kelly felt the Left enjoyed because of its appeal to a collective morality appears to have evaporated.

It is unlikely that the Morrison government will, in the short to medium term, attempt to adopt the culturally progressive policies advocated by the Left while retaining a conventionally conservative approach to the economic challenge of boosting prosperity and building productivity. One conservative politician who has exposed emphatically the falsity of this dichotomy is Senator Amanda Stoker.⁴²

Stoker, in remarks published before the 2019 federal election, argued that it is simply not open to conservatives to yield any ground to the progressives who seek to tribalise society along lines of race, gender, or religion. This would amount to a betrayal of the conservative, classical liberal principles that have been the bedrock of Australian prosperity since the end of World War II. She argues that social and cultural issues are inseparable from ones that are economic and fiscal.

Stoker contends that reclaiming a voice for conservatism must begin with a debate about the role of government and other institutions in the life of the citizen. This entails reaffirming the importance of individual responsibility, and with it, the principle of individual liberty:

We must start talking about freedom to people who don't know, or have forgotten, that getting to a better place in life can, and should, start with taking control of one's life. [This involves] taking back control, [and] owning the decisions that come with freedom, along with their consequences.⁴³

The pressing question is whether conservatism in Australia can make up this lost ground in what is frequently described as the 'culture wars'. For Stoker, sitting on the sidelines of debates about the moral dimension of politics is not an option for conservatives, because it simply cedes the public square to political opponents who would shape the debate.

However, if the culture wars are to be waged with any hope of success, it is essential to understand how the progressive forces of the Left have changed the contours of the culture by emphasising the primacy of identity over community, and of the preferences of the individual over the needs of the communal.

Conclusion: Why Defending Culture Matters

In his famous series of essays on culture, the 19th century essayist, Matthew Arnold argued that the true value of culture lay in it being an indispensable aid to the fullest realisation of the human spirit.

Arnold declared that culture “moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good.”⁴⁴ For Arnold, culture was the pursuit of perfection and the means of getting to know the best in all matters that have contributed to human flourishing. In this pursuit of perfection, therefore, Arnold is clear that culture combines both a moral and social element.

The argument presented here is that the fracturing of our culture can be accounted for, in large part, by the crisis of moral authority that confronts our society. The eclipse of virtue by values has led to a distorted view of morality that is no longer informed by principles of reason but by emotion. The communal norms of morality expressed by virtue have been displaced by a new primacy afforded to feelings.

The fissures in our culture can be closed only by a reinstatement of a moral authority that appeals to norms that transcend the felt concerns and experiences of the individual, and instead locates them in the wider frame of a common human nature so that all may flourish. This must be done, in other words, by appealing to virtue. Yet this is no easy task.

The language of morality in the West is regarded by many with suspicion. Indeed, arguments against positions advanced by the progressive Left, and framed, as such, in terms of appeals to conservative conceptions of moral authority, are frequently met with scepticism, at best, and derision, at worst — dismissed as ideology and ‘hate-filled’ bigotry. We see this repeatedly in debates about issues such as

climate change, gender, school curricula, and the family. It accounts for the assertion of safety as an assumed moral good in its own right.

While acknowledging the formative influence of religion on the development of Western moral thought, it must be stated clearly and unequivocally that this paper does not argue for the restoration of any form of morality determined solely by the demands of theology or the institutions of religion — whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish.⁴⁵

Rather, it calls for a renewed understanding of culture as that which expresses a shared, common vision for our human and social flourishing — an understanding that is passed on in our traditions to future generations. Only in this way can culture, in Arnold’s sense of the pursuit of perfection, give meaning to human experience.

The prevalence of a progressive agenda in contemporary discourse will continue to present a challenge to conservatives committed to the pursuit of this vision of human flourishing. Yet, committed to that vision, conservatism can also affirm that human flourishing depends, in turn, on the recognition and protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms — including the right to religious liberty, not as a subordinate right but as one right coexisting with other rights.

As such, the crisis of moral authority confronting our society poses a threat to religious liberty that it would be unwise to underestimate. This crisis must be addressed by, first of all, refusing to accept the equation of emotional claims with moral claims, and by calling for a reorientation from the personal to the communal. The moral, social, and political health of our society — indeed, of our culture — depends upon it.

Endnotes

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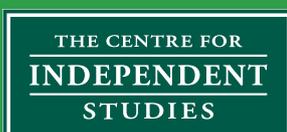
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