



A QUESTION OF ETHICS*

CHARLES W. COLSON

THE BREAKDOWN of character is the number-one crisis in America.

I am not in politics anymore. I have done my time, literally and figuratively, but I can't help watching with dismay what is happening in our country. Watergate was a great shock because so many of us close to the president got in trouble. Now it is routine. Witness what has happened in the last decade. For the first time in history, 10 senators at once were called before the Ethics Committee. A Speaker of the House was forced out of office. Sen Robert Packwood (R-Oreg.) resigned. The Department of Justice bragged that 1,150 state legislators had been successfully prosecuted in one

year—the biggest year the department had ever had, as if it were good news. I think it is tragic.

But the crisis is not just in politics. It is in business as well. There was a time when a fiduciary handling someone else's money was a *trustee*—a respected, honored position of trust. But look at what happened to Ivan Boesky, who went to the UCLA School of Business in 1986 and said, "Greed is a good thing." He ended up in prison. Other examples include Michael Milken and Leona Helmsley, as well as the savings and loan scandals, which cost this country \$500 billion. It's epidemic!

Look at academia. The president of Stanford University had to resign when it was discovered that he had paid \$7,000 for a set of bedsheets and was responsible for millions of dollars in mis-

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managed contracts. The dean of Boston University's School of Journalism resigned, faced, ironically, with evidence of plagiarism.

Let's not forget the media. The president of NBC News lost his job for faking an explosion on a news show.

The crisis goes beyond professional leaders to ordinary people. A disturbing television show featured people in Chicago wrapping Christmas presents for poor kids. The problem was that by noon, the people wrapping the gifts had stolen half of them.

Let me get "close to home." The Naval Academy has wrestled with the issue of students cheating on exams.

I have not cited isolated cases. One recent study found that one-third of all high-school-age teens in America had stolen from a store. And two-thirds had cheated on exams.

Is this a pattern? Is this just human nature? Or is something happening here?

Maybe it is human nature. G. K. Chesterton once said that the doctrine of original sin was the only philosophy empirically validated by all the years of recorded human history.

He may be right, yet I would argue that something is happening in our society—that some line has been crossed. I'm not the only one saying this. The *Washington Post* says that "the problem has reached the point where common decency can no longer be described as common." *New Republic* has said that "there is a destructive sense that nothing is true and everything is permitted."

"In attempting to be tolerant, we have wiped out all the rules. . . . It is hard these days to find a standard to which we can hold people. Everything is relative. Our moral compass gyrates wildly. There is no true north. But history shows us this is not a sustainable trait."

Schools all over America are grappling with the question of ethics—how can we teach people right behavior? Most of them are grappling in vain. Richard Lamm, the former governor of Colorado, who while in office was known as something of a liberal maverick, recently wrote, "In attempting to be tolerant, we have wiped out all the rules. . . . It is hard these days to find a standard to which we can hold people. Everything is relative. Our moral compass gyrates wildly. There is no true north. But history shows us this is not a sustainable trait." I couldn't have said it better myself.

When publications like *New Republic* and the *Washington Post*—hardly known as bastions of biblical morality—or liberal Democrats like Lamm decry the moral malaise, I say something fundamental is happening to the character of people in America. I call it a crisis of character—a breakdown in character.

Character is formed by the largely unwritten rules that govern a society's behavior and the way in which those rules are inculcated into individual behavior. As a society, we create restraints upon people that hold in check their baser instincts, and then we encourage virtue. Virtues—such as duty and charity, responsibility, honor, commitment, love of family and country, discipline, delayed gratification, and compassion—have to be inculcated into us as individuals. Our consciences have to be trained from the day we are born and throughout our lives. Our consciences are continually informed by the values of the society in which we live—the cultivation of habits of the heart, as Alexis de Tocqueville called them.

This is not happening today. That is why there is such an outbreak of crime, which is but a reflection of the moral values of a society. Violent crime is up 560 percent since the 1960s. Such statistics are the result of moral chaos—the breakdown of moral standards. Seventy percent of American people today say moral absolutes do not exist. No wonder we have an ethical crisis! Why is this happening? How has this come about?

Where We've Come From

A study of history shows that, even before the Christian era, the Greeks—especially Aristotle and Plato—held that there had to be absolutes of virtue. It's been said that all philosophy is but a footnote to Plato, who wrote that the purpose of education was to become a good person because a good person behaves nobly. The Greeks understood that virtues existed and that they were based on absolute standards.

Even before the Greeks—going back to the Babylonian empire, 16 centuries before Christ—there was a moral code by which people lived: the Code of Hammurabi, inscribed in the wall. The ancients recognized that society couldn't survive unless people lived by some transcendent, absolute standards. All through the centuries of Western civilization, we were governed by what Harvard historian Christopher Dawson called the "soul" of Western civilization—Judeo-Christian Revelation. In the Age of Reason, that tradition became known as "natural law." Whether you call it Judeo-Christian tradition or natural law or simply the accumulated wisdom of 23 centuries of Western civilization, the fact remains that until recent decades, virtually all people in society agreed that there were absolute, transcendent standards of truth that governed human behavior.

All of that has changed in the last 30 years. Actually, it began 200 years ago in the Enlightenment with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who separated the phenomenological from the pneumatological. He distinguished between one area of inquiry that can be empirically—scientifically—validated and another area that can be apprehended only by faith. Things—such as God—that couldn't be empirically validated were discounted. As a result, God was taken out of the equation of moral discourse. Historian Paul Johnson identifies another significant shift: in 1919 Einstein's scientific theory of relativity was confused with relativism in the moral disciplines.

In the 1960s, all of these forces converged. The existential writers Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre took our college campuses by

storm, arguing that God was dead and that values did not exist. Thus, the object of life was to overcome nothingness by our own heroic effort. Camus came to Columbia University in 1947 and gave a commencement address, whose point was, essentially, that "there is nothing"—that life has no purpose. We should eat, drink, and be merry because there is no God and there is no tomorrow. We should do whatever we feel like doing. That was the message on the campuses of the sixties, and the kids ate it up. They let their hair grow, wore their beads and their tie-dyes, and lived in communes. We all thought it was just a protest, but it was much more than that! The kids were acting out exactly what the professors were teaching them about existentialism.

After the Vietnam War, when I was in the White House, we thought it all was behind us. Not so. The hippies of the sixties simply shaved off their long hair, got rid of their tie-dyes, put on three-piece pinstripe suits, went to New York, and became yuppies. The radical individualism that took root in America in the sixties marked the end of our moral value system. It roared through the seventies and the eighties and is mainstream in America in the nineties. As a result, we live in an era of self-obsession.

Sociologist Robert Bellah asked 200 average, middle-class Americans about their values. When asked about their jobs—what they expected to get from employment—most of them said "personal advancement." Fair enough. Then he asked what they expected to get out of marriage. "Personal development." No wonder marriages are in trouble. What did they expect to get out of church? "Personal fulfillment."¹

Everything turns upon what gratifies us. That's the value system of the day; it destroys character because it takes away the basis of ethics in society. Self-obsession destroys character because it permits no accountability. People are not held accountable for their actions. We live in what Saul Bellow calls the "Golden Age of Exoneration." Everything is *excused*—because we failed to get proper training as children, because we grew up in dysfunctional families, because of something that happened to us. We are not re-

sponsible for our actions, and there are no more rules.

Samuel Johnson, the great wit of eighteenth-century England, was told once that a particular dinner guest believed that morality was a sham. Johnson replied, "If he really believes that there is no distinction between vice and virtue, let us count the spoons before he leaves." That's what is happening in our society. We have to count the spoons because we have lost the distinction between vice and virtue.

Consequences of Relativism

In an era of relativism, nobody can teach ethics. The term derives from the Greek word *ethos*, which literally means a stable, hiding place, or cave—something absolute and unchanging. *Morals*, on the other hand, derives from *mores*, which are always changing as times change.

We need to concern ourselves with ethics—the absolute truths of life, the rights and wrongs of human behavior, the codes we live by—instead of simply with morals, which are constantly changing. Ethics are what ought to be. Morals are what is. Ethics are normative—standard behavior in a society—and we live in a society that says there are no norms. So if we really want to understand ethics, if we want to be ethical people, if we want to be men and women of character, we have to stand against the culture—which says there are no norms. A military officer of character needs to say, "There is a certain behavior that is right and a certain behavior that is wrong. There are rules, and there is truth. And I'm going to spend my life looking for it and living by it."

The tragedy today is that in most universities and colleges, ethics are being taught in terms of social justice. Christina Hoff Sommers teaches ethics at Clark University. She wrote an article saying that ethics are private virtue and that a virtuous society is created by virtuous people. When she wrote this article, one of her colleagues stormed into her office and said, "Oh, this is such an antiquated, Victorian, prud-

ish view of ethics. Ethics are social justice, and in my class we teach how to save the rain forest in Brazil and how to prevent third world exploitation by multinational corporations, public justice policies, and the environment."

Several months later, that colleague came to Sommers and said, "I have just had a shocking experience in my ethics class."

Sommers asked, "What happened?"

The woman said half her students had plagiarized on a take-home test—on ethics! Sommers reminded her of the article about private virtue. The woman said she'd like to read it again.

A second consequence of relativism is that it destroys the moral code. Consider the much-debated policy of Antioch College, where a student engaging in any sexual activity has to ask and get express permission—written permission—from the partner before engaging in the next level of sexual activity. The president of Antioch, defending the policy, said, "The underlying philosophy asserts only one moral value: that each person has the right to have healthy human relationships and to define for himself or herself what that means."

That is a prescription for disaster. If all ethics are simply a reflection of what individual people believe, then all morality is simply a cultural choice—all are equal, which is one contention of extreme multiculturalists. But cultures are different. Dr Ravi Zacharias, a professor teaching apologetics, was speaking one day on campus. A student stood and said, "Dr Zacharias, I believe that morality is simply a reflection of the culture."

Zacharias answered, "In some respects you could argue that. People do say that. But if that's so . . . in some cultures, neighbors love one another, and in other cultures, neighbors eat one another. Which is your preference?"

If absolute standards do not exist, we can't say that apartheid is wrong. If there are no absolute truths, no enduring standards that every culture can appeal to, then how can we say that something is amiss in Brazil, where men are not prosecuted for mutilating their girlfriends or wives because such activity is a sign of one's machismo? One can say it's wrong only if there is

an absolute standard of truth that all societies have to abide by. Having said all that, I'm told the Air Force Academy is ahead of the game. I understand that moral relativism is not taught at the academy but that character is taught, based on some absolute standards. I thank God for the academy's excellent core values: trust, integrity, self-discipline, ethics, accountability, loyalty, mutual respect, and respect for human dignity. I've read the material of the academy's Center for Character Development. It's outstanding. I pray that every cadet will absorb the teaching.

Beyond Head Knowledge

As good as such teaching is, it alone is not enough. Let me present the toughest challenge of all. Knowing the importance of absolutes—knowing right from wrong—is one thing. Even if you study an Air Force handbook and can recite those core values in your sleep, can you live them? That's the question.

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is one of the great classics of literature. There's a wonderful movie version in which Henry Fonda plays the lead. During a very poignant moment in that movie, Pierre—the central character, a hapless fellow who goes through all kinds of problems—walks through the wreckage of a war-torn city. He looks up at the sky and says, "Why is it that I know what is right, and yet I do what is wrong?" That's the question. Why is it that we know what is right, yet we still do what is wrong?

Let's return to Kant. He identified what is known as the "categorical imperative," which holds that individuals have a moral sense and, if properly educated, will do that which—if it were a universal maxim—would be best for all people. That is, if everyone did it, it would be best for everyone. The categorical imperative is a fine, rational approach to ethics. But let's put it to a test.

Let me tell you about my own life. I grew up with a dad who told me one thing: "Always tell the truth. Never lie." That lesson took. I grew up in a very Puritanical environment, where there were absolute rights and absolute wrongs.

As a young man, I was a Marine officer. *Semper fidelis* (always faithful), loyalty to the corps, loyalty to the country—all of that really meant something to me; I'd lay down my life for my country. Then I studied in college, concentrating on political philosophy—particularly John Locke and the social contract. I knew ethical issues. I studied Kant. I understood ethics completely. I did my doctoral work in constitutional law. Then I went into politics—idealistically. I knew that if I could get into politics, I could put my ideas to work for the good of the people. I could clean up corruption.

Everything turns upon what gratifies us. That's the value system of the day; it destroys character, because it takes away the basis of ethics in society. . . . People are not held accountable for their actions.

When I went to work at the Nixon White House, as counsel to the president, I had to leave my law practice, where I was making good money. To be sure I was "clean," I took everything I had earned and put it in a blind trust in a bank in Boston. (I can give you a tip on how to make a small fortune in life. Take a larger fortune and put it in a blind trust in a bank in Boston.) I wouldn't accept Christmas presents. If people gave me Christmas presents, I gave them to my limousine driver. *Nobody* was going to corrupt me. I wouldn't even see people I had formerly represented as a lawyer, because I didn't want to give the appearance of a conflict of interest. I was absolutely self-righteous. No one could corrupt me.

And I was utterly zealous. I wanted more than anything else to get the job done. I knew that I couldn't be compromised.

Yet, I went to prison. So much for Kant's categorical imperative.

Why did I go to prison? Because in the

White House—and you’ll find this in the military—there are enormous peer pressures. You begin to rationalize that what you are doing is okay—in my case, I believed I was protecting the president. To me, advising him and getting him reelected were the most important things I could do for my country. I reasoned that I could stay clean and be righteous no matter what I saw going on around me. One had to stay in the inner circle to have influence.

Peer pressure does that to you. You’ll find that not only in military units but in every aspect of life. Perusing some of the Air Force Academy training materials, I’m impressed to read portions of the memoirs of Gen Harold K. Johnson, Army chief of staff from 1964 to 1968, who says he wished he had gone to President Lyndon Johnson, handed in his four stars, and said in effect, “Either give us the tools to fight in Vietnam or call the war off. This isn’t right.” He didn’t do it because he wanted to stay in the Army. He said he would go to his grave regretting that he did not take a courageous stand and act on what he knew to be right.

But the choices we make are not solely the result of peer pressure. Psychologist Stanton Samenow says that we are not morally neutral. If we are put in a room—alone, behind locked doors, no trick mirrors—and given two choices, we will more often choose the wrong way than the right way. We are not morally neutral. Every single one of us is a sinner. We’re dangerous when we think we aren’t. People are most dangerous when they are convinced of their own self-righteousness. I was blinded. I thought I knew the law. I was blinded by my own infinite capacity for self-rationalization and self-justification.

You’ll run into exactly the same problem. The little compromise becomes an even larger compromise. You get to the point that you don’t even realize you’re shading the truth. You’ve heard it said that it doesn’t matter what people do in their private lives and that private actions don’t necessarily have public consequences. Don’t believe it. Somebody who will cheat a little bit will cheat a lot. Somebody who will cheat on his wife will cheat on his taxes. Make no mis-

take; character is character—public or private. Once a person begins to rationalize, it’s only a matter of degree. It can happen to anybody—most likely to the self-righteous.

So what’s the answer?

Transformed Hearts

Derek Bok, an ethicist and former president of Harvard University, has said he could find no correlation between ethical beliefs and ethical behavior. Something has to happen, he says, inside a person. That brings me to the most critical question of all: how do we subdue our natural disposition to do the wrong thing? C. S. Lewis, the late Oxford scholar whose writings have so profoundly influenced my life, wrote a short article called “Men without Chests.”² I encourage you to read it. The topic is relativism, and Lewis wrote this some 40 years ago, before it was really the rampant philosophy that it is today.

He said, “No justification of virtue will enable a man to be virtuous. Without the aid of trained emotions, the intellect is powerless against the animal organism. In battle it is not syllogism that will keep the reluctant nerves and muscles to their post in the third hour of bombardment. The crudest sentimentalism about a flag or a country or a regiment will be of more use.” He goes on, quoting Plato: “As the king governs by his executive, so Reason in man (that is the head) must rule the mere appetites (that is the stomach or passions) by the spirited element. The head rules the belly through the chest, [which is the seat of] emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments.”³

He’s saying that the head can’t control the passions of the stomach—except by the “spirited element.” Then he writes one of the most prophetic commentaries on our culture. In ghastly simplicity he says, “We remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”⁴

What is the “spirited element”? Here I speak of my own personal experience—not with any intent to proselytize or to offend anyone’s sensibilities about the separation of church and state. More than 20 years ago, when in a flood of tears I surrendered my life to Christ, I discovered what Plato called the “spirited element”—the conversion of the soul, the change of the disposition, the change of the human heart. You no longer want to do what is wrong. You want to do what is right—and you also have the will to subdue the passions of the stomach. Something has to happen to transform your nature.

Here’s what happened to me. I had left the White House in the spring of 1973. I thought I wasn’t in any trouble because I hadn’t been in any of the critical meetings that ended up constituting the Watergate conspiracy. As a matter of fact, the Watergate prosecutor had told me I was not going to be prosecuted.

After I left the White House, something happened. I went to talk to an old friend, the president of one of the largest corporations in the country. I knew him well. I hadn’t seen him in four years. Immediately I could sense that he was changed, different—he was calm and at peace. “What’s happened to you?” I asked. He said he had accepted Jesus Christ and committed his life to Him.

And God transformed my life that summer. I was converted, just as my friend had been. For me that meant that I acted out what I knew to be right. I voluntarily went to the Watergate prosecutors and said, “Here’s something I’ve done.” I had disseminated derogatory information about Daniel Ellsberg, who stole the Pentagon papers and published them. I thought it was a traitorous act, so I tried to stop him by giving derogatory information to the newspapers. I told the prosecutors I had done it, because my Christian faith was now on trial. I do not want this to sound self-righteous, but I will also point out that if I have any dubious distinction in the course of my Watergate conviction, it was that in 44 times of giving testimony under oath, I was never charged with perjury, as were the other defendants.

I hold myself accountable to three or four men. . . . This isn’t about peer pressure. It’s about personal accountability—because the one person you really can’t trust is yourself.

We become ethical people not by knowing what is right and wrong but by doing what is right. Samenow, who is Jewish, says that to solve the problem of crime, the wrongdoer has to convert to a more responsible lifestyle. Writing from a non-Christian perspective, he similarly says there has to be a personal conversion—to want to do what is right—because we are beholden to a higher authority than ourselves.

Is there any way for society to find its way out of the moral quagmire in which we live? Is there any hope for the restoration of character? What happens to a society when transcendent values no longer exist, when we no longer have rules to live by? We’re all going to be counting our spoons and boarding up our homes at night. Is there any way out?

Yes, there is. We have to recover the half-forgotten teachings of the saints and sages. We have to abandon the mad pursuit of pleasure. We have to reject what the president of Antioch College said—that we define for ourselves the meaning of “healthy” relationships, the meaning of right and wrong. That’s not true. We have to give up the idea of radical individualism and personal autonomy and recover the rich tradition of our heritage—the understanding of an enduring law of transcendent absolutes by which people and nations are governed and live civilly with one another in this world.

Yes, there is a way. I call it the Way because I personally know of no other enduring way to subdue the stubborn, rebellious, self-justifying human will. Remember, I had all the right training,

but I couldn't subdue my will because I had the infinite capacity for self-rationalization, and all of us do. Since I have surrendered my life to God, I am a Christian; I surrendered my life to Christ—I live by what Christ teaches. That does not mean I'm perfect. As I make decisions, I pray and ask for wisdom and guidance. But I don't rely totally on my feelings. I check my decisions with somebody else. I hold myself accountable to three or four men—members of my board of directors. They ask tough questions about how I spend my time, how I treat my family, where my priorities are. This isn't about peer pressure. It's about personal accountability—because the one person you really can't trust is yourself.

Yes, there's hope—if we understand that ethics are not just about social justice. Ethics include social justice but are more directly

about individual virtue—about knowing what is right and having the will to live it.

If you apply these enduring truths, if you will convert from your own desires to live by higher standards, if you will understand that the question of character pervades all of life, then you will serve your fellow countrymen with honor. And you will be the better person for it. □

Notes

1. See Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

2. In C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man; or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

A little neglect may breed mischief: for want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost, and for want of a horse the rider was lost.

—Poor Richard (aka Ben Franklin)

Contributor

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