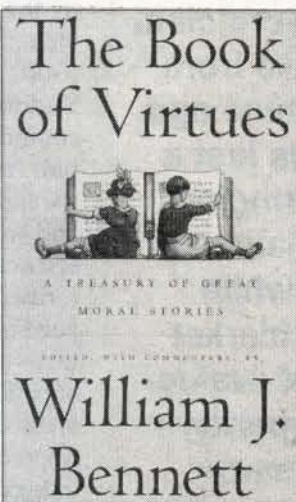


The Book of Hypocrisy

THE
MORAL
SENSE
JAMES Q.
WILSON



William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

Multicultural America is getting hard on some stomachs. It was easy to digest the once-generous call of the Statue of Liberty for all immigrants in post-slavery America. Somehow things worked out for the best for everyone, for the very early arrivals and the late immigrant arrivals. Now, the mix looks quite different with visions of difference becoming quite disturbing each passing year.

Attacks on the new diversity have already begun. First, there were the censorship wars of the Reagan years; hectic nitpicking against marginal artists who gobbled up a small fraction of the vast taxpayers' collection. Then, there were the Political Correctness wars of the Bush years, when everyone right of extreme (and unknown) leftists were beating up on the so-called thought police.

In between these phony wars, we had some real problems; the new immigration policy of selec-

tive "assimilation," the Republican convention, the Rodney-King affair and the LA riots, the Crown Heights crisis, the two-language debate in the Southwest and a host of social crises, all of which alarmed the most optimists of multiculturalists.

With the invocation of the family values issue the terrain of this debate and struggle are shifting. Unable and unwilling to face up to some harsh economic and cultural realities of the changing world and the nation, the Right is articulating its vision of a multicultural America in much nascent and benevolent terms. There are no social conflicts precipitated by the neglect of human concern (or human rights, for that matter) in this new vision. There are just good old fashioned values and virtues to be embraced with a clean mind, just the same way as a patient swallows vitamins to keep fit. The new prescriptions for what is desirable and worth rewarding are coming from two heavyweights, one a former secretary of education and chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and an aspirant for the White House, and the other a social philosopher.

After few weeks of bestsellers from Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh and Beavis and ButtHead, William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* is climbing up the charts. Nobel prize winner Tony

Morrison is nowhere to be found on the list and Maya Angelou is losing her place to this onslaught of prescriptions of filth and virtues. Take it for what its worth!

The Book of Virtues is a "Treasury of Great Moral Stories," edited with a commentary by the former czar of education and drugs. It is a voluminous work of some 800 pages, presented with light-headed admiration for voluntary will to be "good." The desire to be "good," is necessary, but not sufficient, opines Mr. Bennett. What is needed is practice to make that desire stand on some solid ground. He gives the example of Demosthenes who overcame his stuttering by putting pebbles in his mouth.

No, it is not that simple. Mr. Bennett is outlining his social philosophy. For all those lazy sections of the population, the implied moral is that one should simply work hard on the good virtues, even if it means the virtues are prescribed for you in adverse conditions and even if it means you choke on the pebbles in the process of perfecting the practice.

Since he hasn't written much himself, except for quick nuggets of commentary on a collection of stories, fables, speeches, poetry, literary prose and plain old folksy tales of wisdom, Bennett is asking for credit in organizing the material. That is not much of a job for a former secretary of education who held the lot of his peers to a much higher standard.

Anyway, if you want to meet him on his own terms, you will find the collection of virtuous stories under the classifications which are in themselves innocuous. It is impossible to argue about the desirability of the virtues of compas-

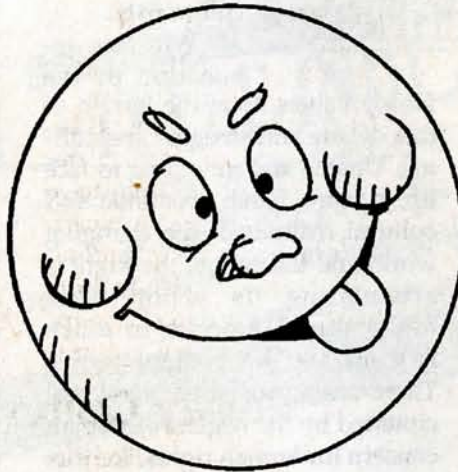
sion, friendship, responsibility, loyalty, honesty, perseverance and faith.

So long as lists are important, however, Mr. Bennett would have done well with some more complicated virtues and problems such as a sense of fairness, justice, equality, respect, self-critique, community and collective responsibility. As Lee Siegel, in his review of the book in *The Nation* (December 20, 1993) points out, Bennett has no compunction choosing stories of fairies who reward poor children and women for their honesty and hard work, when in fact he and his part-endorsed programs where accepting handouts from anyone was considered a "non-virtuous" thing to do. Contradiction and hypocrisy never troubles the Right, because self-criticism took its leave from them a long time ago. Now there is just a fervor in bringing about a socialism of morality while preaching market capitalism of "value-free" prosperity.

Mr. Bennett is on slippery ground for his juxtaposition of the stories, let alone his careful selection that underscores his motives for omission of equally significant treasures. Most significant is any dimension of social cohesion or community in his world view. If people (beginning with children, "catch-them young" Mr. Bennett exhorts) are simply courageous, responsible, honest and hard working, the rest should take care of itself.

The former secretary of education loves things western, in the West-ern sense of the term. He gave sermons preaching to school and college administrators about bringing back the much admired virtues of the Western tradition, without being ashamed of anything. When the stories support the human dignity of all, no Western concept seemed troublesome.

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But Mr. Bennett and his cohorts didn't tune in to the criticism of those Western texts which perpetuated colonialism and oppression and which robbed people of their basic dignity. No person on the Right wants to listen to that criticism of the West.

Now, Mr. Bennett in his multicultural garb, is turning his attention to "other" cultures to look for virtues, perhaps to prove that the qualities the West (or the Right) values in human beings are somewhat universal. So we get a lesson about Yudhishtira, on his way to heaven with his dog, embalming for Mr. Bennett the virtue of loyalty. Any child of Indian culture

could tell Mr. Bennett of a tale or two from *Mahabharata* which are more to the situation of a common life, the qualities of responsibility to the community, the price of violence, the need for tolerance and finally, the complexity of Yudhishtira himself. But for this compiler of wisdom, what attracts him from *Mahabharata* is a tale at the end of a complex drama of duty and work, a conflict between conscience and responsibility. The former secretary of education is in need of more education. Before he takes another office in the corridors of power, someone should volunteer to enroll him. Consider that your social responsibility, a very "good" virtue indeed!

Then there is the soulmate of Bennett's and George F. Will's. James Q. Wilson's book hasn't hit the charts, but that may be an indication of its silent contribution. It is a book remarkably similar in tone and intent to that of Bennett's. It looks more like a "theoretical" outline for what Bennett's may be a manual of sorts.

James Q. Wilson's point is that there are some virtues (he doesn't like the term, he prefers "morals") which are inherently structured in human consciousness. It is like a genetic imprint of all human beings. Deriving his motivation and support from scientific work, Wilson says that all human beings have a moral sense, that is there are some universals in our cognition of beauty, courage, sympathy, fairness and duty. These morals are instinctively born but nurtured by the institutions of family, gender roles, social interaction and an aspiration to belong to a global human identity.

Since he asks us not to, it is futile to raise the usual criticism about his thesis. That is, if there is a moral sense, where is the sensory organ? Or, how come people argue about what is right and wrong?

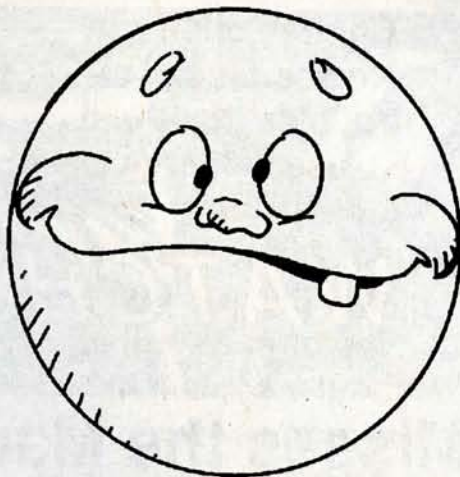
There is a more fundamental notion at work than his admitted objections to this worldview. There is a limited role to cultural learning. Different cultures can only shape the basic morals in a somewhat differing way, thereby adding to the variety of manifestations of universal morals.

It is also not appropriate here to pick a scholarly argument about Wilson's thesis. The implications for diverse cultures are most important when we consider the role and influence of a book such as this one. Once it is agreed that some morals are universal and therefore part of human character, cultural context, tradition and values are seen as aberrations. The world is divided between the right and wrong, when the right is defined by those whose instincts discover the morals that are most desirable for themselves. It is no longer important to see why people steal, why some people are selfish and insecure. There is just one prescription for all ailments. Diversity must soon dissolve into a universal community. James Q. Wilson is eager to define such community.

Different circumstances, different historical imperatives and different social needs are not important except as major diversions from the agenda of desirable moral uniformity.

The implicit agenda of James Q. Wilson's book is evident in the admiration by his co-traveller, George F. Will. In his syndicated column of December 21, Will endorses the idea that instincts found in nature, and may be in "children," (Equating children and nature on the grounds of pure innocence is pure magic or hallucination) are cultivated in the family and good parenting. Family values come up the scene!

There we go again! In other words, good parenting involves,



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endorsing the codes of moral behavior found in children, disregarding the wisdom you may have gathered by years of adult experience. The moral sense is battling against its "wilder" rivals, says Will. Guess where these rivals have triumphed. In the bestial cultures

without appropriate family support, without appropriate social mechanisms for punishments and rewards.

These pronouncements are coded in moral terms, in pure language of desirability and all in a "good" sense. The facts that social conflicts and human suffering arise because of human irresponsibility and structural violence against minorities, women and other cultures are not going to bother these theoreticians who are eager to rewrite our moral agenda. There was a belief once that if you dominate people's lives in economic sense, you will possess their values as well. Unluckily for the social planners, that did not work out. In all the euphoria about the collapse of socialism and the triumph of market capitalism, the Right didn't forget to notice this very important social event. Now they are sharpening their weapons. They have your purse, now they want your virtues, morals and values. Colonization never ends!

— Shekhar Deshpande

Commodity Culture Strikes Again!

A recent news story is likely to remain on our minds for a long time. A French designer for the house of Chanel put Koranic verses on the breastline of a tight black bustier, worn by the famous and now-in-trouble model, Claudia Schiffer. Obviously, this has angered Muslims in France and Germany.

How was the mistake made? Chanel's designer Karl Lagerfeld was reading a book on Taj Mahal. He saw some fancy and exotic looking script around the photographs. He asked someone (equally ignorant) what that was. The discussion soon arrived at the idea that since Taj Mahal is about love, it must be a love poem. So Lagerfeld

put the design on the breastline of a provocative and revealing dress.

How illustrative this story is about how people who are obsessed with representation are working though their prejudices and ignorance. Sure, it was a mistake. But a mistake informed by lack of knowledge, lack of willingness to learn about another culture, lack of concern about the context of another culture and a primary concern with creating exotic saleable images that only perpetuate the stereotypes in the minds of millions. A mistake alright, but a mistake that shapes and influences misunderstanding. How else could you get attention of these high placed ignorant cultural artists. —SD