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Reality without virtue

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Humans are distinguished from other animals by their evolving capacity for complex communication, higher-level reasoning, sensitive emotional expression and creativity. Both science and philosophy agree on the central role of human perception and reasoning in interpreting, understanding and sharing "reality". A positivist ontology views reality as objective, external, permanent, measurable, predictable and physical, while a constructivist ontology views reality as subjective, internal, experienced, interpreted, dynamic and metaphysical.

The polarisation of positivist-constructivist ontologies on the nature of physical reality is matched by similarly divergent views on human nature. Some people react instinctively to others from an adversarial, sceptical, judgemental and expedient perspective (and are happy to be called realists). Others respond in good faith in empathic, sincere, inquiring and principled ways (and are happy to be called idealists). These perspectives are largely irreconcilable, with realists viewing idealists as naïve and weak and idealists viewing realists as cynical and tough.

Many of the fundamental principles that are the foundations for contemporary secular societies have their origins in pre-Christian Aristotelian virtues that define the characteristics of a "good" person in a humane and civilised society. Aristotle suggested a range of moral and intellectual ideals such as moderation, modesty, magnanimity, patience, honesty, friendliness and courage. These virtues have since evolved to include selflessness, decency, graciousness, humility, generosity, integrity, prudence, equity, dignity and compassion.

Some of these virtues have been embedded in the cultures of societies through various centuries-old institutions and rules (democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech). In the mid-20th century the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reiterated the principles of the dignity, equal worth, inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms of every person as the foundations for freedom, justice and peace. However, many of these virtues are discretionary and contested and are sustained through social and cultural norms and modelling by community leaders.

It is a great irony in the 21st century that ubiquitous technologies that universally empower people by facilitating access to virtually limitless information is also transforming individual perceptions of reality and challenging long-standing moral precepts on the attributes of a "good" society. The globalisation of free-market economic ideology (with the liberation of individual "animal spirits") has accelerated the displacement of (idealist) intrinsic value with (realist) monetary value, inevitably eroding long-standing social and cultural norms.

The information revolution has arguably had its most profound impact at the personal level. A growing crescendo of information "noise" challenges the individual's capacity

to interpret and make sense of reality, disrupting existing processes for creating and sharing knowledge. A natural human response to the immediacy, intensity, complexity and quantity of largely undifferentiated information is the creation of filters that prioritize those issues that are of direct and immediate personal relevance while excluding more complex, detached and abstract ideas

In responding to the challenges (and opportunities) of the information revolution, some people have become absorbed in their own personal domains, and it is conceivable that recent data from the ABS 2014 General Social Survey that shows a 5% decline in volunteering from 36% in 2010 to 31% in 2014 represents a contraction in real social participation in Australia. Others have turned to "trusted" high-profile media commentators to interpret and simplify a sometimes complex and threatening world. Exclusive and secure social networks enable narrow sectional interests and extreme perspectives to be sustained without challenge, with the potential that knowledge/fact/science/complexity will be displaced by belief/prejudice/gossip/simplicity.

The devastating impact of the information revolution on the traditional media is now widely acknowledged. Responding to heightened competition and decreasing consumer engagement, information producers and reporters have adopted a range of strategies to "cut through" the information noise. Crude but seemingly effective strategies include making the message louder and more sensational by using shocking, outrageous or lurid dimensions; creating and building an air of artificial crisis; or seeking to exploit visceral emotions such as fear or grief by projecting threatening or horrifying imagery.

This changed dynamic has had profound implications for Australian politics that has relied on the traditional media for access to the constituency. The traditional media still retains significant power to influence the public agenda in Australia, partly because of an unusually high concentration of (partisan) media ownership in this country. Unrelenting crisis-oriented media coverage and the pressures of a 24 hour reporting cycle have forced politicians to revert to often demeaning and deceptive gimmicks, clichés and slogans to reach the electorate, at the same time increasing the appeal of highly-fickle populism. In the last five years media-generated crises have contributed to leadership challenges in both major political parties.

Given the unique leadership role of Australian politicians as primary custodians of the national narrative, the demonstration of cynicism, expediency, opportunism, hypocrisy and an apparent lack of genuine conviction or integrity have progressively eroded community confidence in and respect for both politicians and democratic processes in Australia. A pervasive sense of cynicism has settled on the Australian community, providing little space for those who continue to argue for virtuous moral perspectives and an idealistic national vision.

In Australia the dominant media constantly derides as unrealistic and anachronistic the expression of intrinsic virtues and higher national aspirations, and the loss of the rare public champions for moral reasoning (such as the late former PM Malcolm Fraser) is highly regrettable. Whether it is public discourse on asylum seekers, gender equity, indigenous recognition or racism, the prevailing perspective is a pessimistic and utilitarian realism.

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