

IN DEFENSE OF THE VICTORIANS

The Victorian moral code has come under steady criticism during the 20th century. British intellectuals of the Edwardian era, among them Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, dismissed their parents' ethics as hypocritical and prudish. More recently, some historians have charged that the Victorian ethos was little more than a weapon of "social control," a means by which the upper classes kept the lower orders in line. Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb finds such interpretations both condescending and wrong. The Victorians, she argues, placed their highest premium on values essential to the health of liberal societies—not social control but "self-control, self-help, self-reliance, self-discipline."

by Gertrude Himmelfarb

"Manners and Morals"—the expression is peculiarly, unmistakably Victorian. Not "manners" alone: Lord Chesterfield in the 18th century was fond of discoursing to his son on the supreme importance of manners—manners as distinct from (if necessary, in opposition to) morals. And not "morals" alone: Philosophers had always taken this as their special province, had, indeed, made it so elevated a subject that it had little to do with anything so mundane as manners.

It was the Victorians who combined these words so that they came trippingly off the tongue, as if they were one word. Manners were sanctified and moralized, so to speak, while morals were secularized and domesticated. When William Thackeray earlier in the century, or Anthony Trollope later, protested that manners were taking precedence over morals, that "the way we live now" (in the memorable title of one of Trollope's last novels) encouraged the cultivation of manners at the expense of morals, it was because they themselves attached so much importance not only to morals but to the continuum of manners and morals.



The concern of England's upper classes for the welfare of the poor was often derided as hypocritical "slumming," as this 1884 Punch cartoon suggests.

Margaret Thatcher has been reported as saying that she would be pleased to restore all Victorian values, with the exception of hypocrisy. If she did say that, she betrayed a serious misunderstanding of Victorian values. Hypocrisy, in the well-known phrase of *La Rochefoucauld*, is "the homage that vice pays to virtue." It is also the homage that manners pay to morals. The Victorians thought it no small virtue to maintain the appearance, the manner, of good conduct even while violating some basic precept of morality.

This was, in fact, what the eminent Victorians did when they felt obliged to commit some transgression. They did not flout conventional morality; on the contrary, they tried to observe at least the manner of it. George Eliot, living with a man whom she could not marry because he could not legally be divorced from his wife, reproduced in their relationship all the forms of propriety. They lived together in a perfectly domestic, monogamous arrangement, quite as if they had been married. Indeed, she called herself, and insisted that others call her, "Mrs. Lewes," and had the great satisfaction of hearing the real Mrs. Lewes involuntarily call her that. And when Mr. Lewes died, after 24 years of this pseudo-marriage (one can hardly call it an affair), she almost immediately took the occasion to enter a real, a legal marriage with John Cross—with all the appurtenances

thereof: a proper trousseau, a formal wedding in church, a honeymoon. All of which shocked her friends more than her earlier pseudo-marriage because this seemed to them a true misalliance; her new husband was 20 years her junior and much her intellectual inferior.

And so too with other notorious "irregularities," as the Victorians delicately put it: extramarital relationships (such as that of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor), or marital relationships which were unconsummated (the Carlyles and the Ruskins), or homosexual relationships (such as were presumed to exist in the Oxford Movement). Those caught up in an irregular situation of this kind tried, as far as they possibly could, to "regularize" it, to contain it within its conventional form, to domesticate it and normalize it. And when they could not do so (or even when they did), they agonized over it in diaries and letters—which they carefully preserved, and which is why we now know so much about these scandals.

So, at least, it was until the end of the century, when the moral certitudes began to falter. "For the Englishman," Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in 1889, "morality is not yet a problem." Not yet a problem, he thought, because the English still had the illusion that they could sustain morality in the absence of a religion; they did not realize how firmly rooted in Christianity their morality was. When Christianity lost its ascendancy, as Nietzsche thought it inevitably would, the English would discover how tenuous their morality was.



Nietzsche's words were prophetic—not, to be sure, for the English as a whole. But then Nietzsche was not talking about the English as a whole—the masses, or "slave class," as he called them, who mindlessly observed the manners and morals imposed upon them by the "priestly class." He was talking about the priestly class itself, the intellectual aristocracy, many of whom were atheists and some of whom came to think of themselves as "free souls," liberated from both religion and morality.

Nietzsche had no sooner made that pronouncement than public confirmation of it began to appear in the *fin-de-siècle* movement

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celebrated by such "esthetes" and "decadents," as they proudly described themselves, as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. It is interesting that, from the beginning, the movement was known under that French label, as if to suggest how alien it was to England—rather like the "French flu" or the "French pox." A character in a novel of the period remarks, in an execrable accent, "It's *fang-de-seeacle* that does it, my dear, and education and reading French."

The movement was well named; it did not survive the *siècle*. The *Yellow Book* expired in 1897, Beardsley died the following year, and Wilde died in exile (appropriately in France) in 1900. In his last and perhaps best play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde delivered himself of one of those witticisms that was possibly truer than the author himself knew. "I hope," a young woman says, "you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and really being good all the time. That would be hypocrisy."



It was a nice accident of history that saw Queen Victoria die in January 1901, so that the end of the reign coincided with the start of the new century. The end of the reign and, for an influential group of intellectuals—the new priestly class—the end of Victorianism. The High Priests of Bloomsbury were not hypocritical in pretending to be more wicked than they were; their only hypocrisy, recent scholarship has shown, was in concealing from the public the wickedness they flaunted in private. After the death of Leslie Stephen (the Victorian paterfamilias of Bloomsbury), his children moved from respectable Kensington to what was to become the new Bohemia, Bloomsbury. "Everything was going to be new," his daughter pronounced. "Everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial." Later, Virginia Stephen (Virginia Woolf, as we now know her) assigned a different date to that new era. "In or about December 1910," she pronounced with remarkable assurance, "human character changed."

December 1910 was the date of the Post-Impressionist exhibit (organized by another member of the clan, Roger Fry) that so dramatically altered the artistic sensibilities of her generation. It was also, as Virginia Woolf saw it, the time when a new ethic was beginning to emerge to complement the new aesthetic. Just as art now appeared to be autonomous, dependent on no external reality but only on the vision and imagination of the artist, so the character of the artist (or of the writer, or of any other person with superior sensibility) was seen as autonomous, self-contained, not subject to the judgment of others nor bound by any sense of "obligation to others."

The conventional idea, Virginia Woolf declared, of "living for others, not for ourselves," was intended for "timid natures who dare not allow their souls free play." Bloomsbury was made of sterner

stuff. Later, one of its founding fathers described its basic tenet. "We repudiated entirely," Maynard Keynes wrote, "customary morals, conventions and traditional wisdom. We were, that is to say, in the strict sense of the term, immoralists."

"Everything was on trial," Virginia Woolf had said. What was mainly on trial was Victorian morals and manners. Another member of Bloomsbury, its most flamboyant one, had the audacious idea of putting on trial some of the most eminent Victorians—and by implication Victorianism as such. *Eminent Victorians* was published in 1918. A half century earlier, that title could have been used and understood in all sincerity. When Lytton Strachey used it, no one could mistake its ironic intent.

Strachey made no secret of his purpose or his method. Ordinary history, he explained in his preface, "proceeded by the direct method of scrupulous narration." The historian of the Victorian age had to adopt a "subtler strategy":

He will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined. He will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up into the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity.

Strachey concluded his preface with the familiar adage—"Je n'impose rien; je ne propose rien; j'expose."

The eminent Victorians Strachey chose to expose were eminent in different fields. Cardinal Manning was an eminent ecclesiastic; Florence Nightingale an eminent social reformer; Dr. Thomas Arnold an eminent educator; General Gordon an eminent soldier and patriot. They were all eminences and, more to the point, heroes. Strachey's intention was to belittle and disparage them—demystify them, we say today; deheroize would be more accurate. In each case what passed as heroism Strachey interpreted as megalomania, a ruthless drive for self-aggrandizement.

It is interesting that in seeking out the defects which would belie their heroism—in dipping his bucket into the depths of that murky sea—Strachey never came up with the two "dirty secrets" that a muck-raking biographer would look for today: money and sex. Drunkenness, yes, and vanity, and willfulness, and irrationality, and physical flaws. But not financial gain and not sexual misconduct. If there was anything sexually scandalous about them, Strachey intimated, it was either their celibacy, as in the case of Manning and Nightingale, or

their conspicuous normality, as in the case of Dr. Arnold, who fulfilled his marital duties all too faithfully, as the existence of his 10 children testified. (It is not surprising that there is no mention of Gordon's reputed homosexuality; that might have required Strachey to have presented him in a more favorable light.)

Apart from their megalomania, the one flaw they had in common was their weakness for religion. They were all religious to a fault. Cardinal Manning might be forgiven for this; it was, after all, his job to be religious, although he went beyond the call of duty by believing what he preached. The others not only professed to believe when they had no obligation to do so; they actually did believe. Strachey's wicked comment about Florence Nightingale is often quoted: "She felt towards Him [God] as she might have felt towards a glorified sanitary engineer: . . . she seems hardly to distinguish between the Deity and the Drains." But Strachey was even more distressed by her truly religious feelings, her "mysterious moods of mysticism," her "morbid longings" to find peace in God.

To "expose," as Strachey saw it, the religious proclivities of these eminent Victorians was to expose, and undermine, the very foundations of their morality. It was also to expose them as frauds—not in the sense that they were hypocritical about their religion; the trouble was not that they were hypocritical but that they were true believers. What was fraudulent, Strachey suggested, was their claim (or the claim made on their behalf) that they were heroes. Heroes could not be religious any more than a heroine such as Florence Nightingale could be seen—as Strachey depicted her—putting a dog's wounded paw in a splint.



There were, in fact, no heroes in Strachey's scheme of things, because the heroic virtues were as suspect as all the other virtues. And not only heroic virtues but also heroic attitudes—the manners and morals, as it were, of heroism. For Strachey, religion, public service, civic education, patriotism were absurd in themselves. But they were even more absurd in the manner of their pursuit—in the passionate, extravagant way heroes were wont to pursue them. And they were more absurd still in the manner of their reception, the respect accorded them by a credulous and deferential public.

Early in the Queen's reign, another eminent Victorian (not satirized by Strachey, but he could well have been) wrote the classic defense of heroism. "Society," Thomas Carlyle wrote, "is founded on hero-worship . . . [the] reverence and obedience due to men really great and wise." Like Nietzsche anticipating the time when morality would have become "a problem" in England, so Carlyle anticipated the time when the heroic virtues would become problematic. Indeed

he thought that time had already come. "Show our critics," he wrote in 1840, "a great man, a Luther for example, they begin to what they call "account" for him; not to worship him, but to take the dimensions of him—and bring him out to be a little kind of man!" It is not clear which critics Carlyle had in mind—perhaps John Stuart Mill or Jeremy Bentham, those pettifogging, "dry-as-dust" rationalists. But it could easily have been Strachey. This is not to say that Carlyle saw no flaws in his heroes; on the contrary, he expected a hero's flaws, his vices, to be as large, as heroic, as his virtues. When the biographer of Sir Walter Scott was criticized for being indiscreet, for recounting episodes that made Scott appear (so the critics said) unheroic, Carlyle came to the biographer's defense. And he took the occasion to mock the conventional biography: "How delicate, decent, is the English biography, bless its mealy mouth."

In deriding the mealy-mouthed biography, Carlyle did not mean to condone the Strachey type of biography which poor-mouths or bad-mouths its subjects, reducing the hero to a "little kind of man." Still less would he have condoned the present fashionable genre of history that disdains any type of heroism or eminence, that reads history "from below," as it is said, celebrating not individual heroes, not great men (or even great women) but rather *le petit peuple*, the "common men," the "anonymous masses."

One of the paradoxes of the new mode of history is that it professes to celebrate the common man while demeaning the virtues usually associated with the common man. If Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* is in disfavor today, it is not so much because it is unscholarly history as because it is "elitist" history. It disparages the manners and morals of eminent Victorians but says nothing about the manners and morals of ordinary Victorians. It is, Marxists would say, insufficiently "critical"; it demystifies the heroic virtues and not the bourgeois ones.



Such values as thrift, prudence, diligence, temperance, and self-reliance were indeed bourgeois ones. But they were also classical ones; they were hardly unfamiliar to the Greeks. And they were also religious ones; it was, after all, from the Jews and Christians that the Puritans derived them.

They were working-class values too: ones aspired to (not always successfully, but then all of us fall short of our aspirations) by the "respectable" Victorian laboring classes.

"Respectable"—there's another Victorian word that makes us uncomfortable, which we can scarcely utter without audible quotation marks. An influential school of historians now interprets the idea of respectability, and all the virtues connected with it, as instruments of

“social control”—the means by which the middle class, the ruling class, sought to dominate the working class: a subtle and covert way of conducting the class struggle.

Some early applications of the social-control thesis were plausible. The invention of the modern clock, it has been said, made possible habits such as promptness, regularity, and rationality, which were useful for the so-called work-discipline or time-discipline of an industrial, capitalist economy. Even here, however, the thesis has sometimes been stretched to the point where it seems as if the clock had been invented for that very purpose (this a couple of centuries before the emergence of industrialism and capitalism!); as if the rural economy knew no form of work-discipline; and as if nature did not have its own rhythms which can be no less compelling and oppressive.



But there is a more serious flaw at the heart of this social-control thesis. This is the assumption that the Puritan ethic was little more than a work ethic designed to “moralize” the new industrial proletariat and imbue the workers with middle-class values that would make them more productive members of society. Such alien values, so this argument runs, were imposed upon the workers by a middle class that enjoyed a cultural as well as an economic and political “hegemony,” and were accepted by a working class led astray by “false consciousness,” unable to recognize its own true, indigenous values and interests.

It is not clear what these indigenous values are supposed to have been—communal, presumably, rather than individualistic, and cooperative rather than competitive. One historian has said that it is only through the “distorting lens of middle-class aspirations to gentility” that the idea of self-help, for example, can be understood. But does this mean that this idea, the value of self-reliance and independence, was alien to Victorian workers, in which case are we to understand that dependency was congenial to them? And what of the other alien, middle-class values supposedly imposed on them? Is it to be assumed that workers were naturally indolent rather than industrious, or profligate rather than frugal, or drunk rather than sober? And if these middle-class values reflected the interests of capitalist society, does it mean that a socialist society would embrace a proletarian set of values—indolence, perhaps, or profligacy, or intemperance?

It must be remembered that the social-control thesis is advanced not by reactionary historians but by radical ones who are avowedly sympathetic to the working class, who, as one put it in an often quoted passage, want to rescue the poor and oppressed from the “enormous condescension of posterity.”

One wonders, however, which is more condescending: to

attribute to the Victorian working class a radically different set of values from those professed by the rest of society, or to assume that most workers essentially shared these so-called middle-class values, and that if they sometimes failed to abide by them it was because of the difficult circumstances of life or the natural weaknesses of the human condition. Is it more condescending to describe these workers as the victims of "false consciousness" or to credit them with a true consciousness of their values and interests? False consciousness is a crucial part of the social-control thesis, because the radical historian has to account for the inconvenient fact that a great many workers seemed to view their own lives through that "distorting lens" of middle-class values. And it was not only the so-called labor aristocracy (as it is sometimes claimed) that suffered from this myopia; lesser skilled and unskilled workers did so as well, perhaps because they had most to lose if they lost their respectability.

These values, moreover, were consciously shared by the most radical British workers. The memoirs of those involved in Chartism, a working-class reform movement, provide poignant testimony to their efforts to remain hard-working, sober, frugal, clean, in short, respectable, despite all temptations to the contrary. There were groups within the movement—the Temperance Chartists and Education Chartists—who made this their main concern. Indeed the central tenet of Chartism, universal suffrage, was based on just this claim to respectability. The argument for political equality depended on the argument for natural equality, a common human nature—common values, aspirations, and capacities.



As for those middle-class British reformers—educators, political economists, and politicians who encouraged these values among the working classes—how condescending were they? Was it condescending on their part to credit the poor with the values that they prized so highly for themselves—and not only the values but the ability and will to fulfill these values? Were they patronizing the poor when they applied to them a single standard of values rather than the double standard that had prevailed so long—a double standard, incidentally, implicit in the social-control thesis? So far from keeping the working classes in a condition of inferiority, that single standard was an invitation to economic betterment, social advance, and, ultimately, political equality. It was also an attempt to bridge the "two nations" barrier dramatized by Benjamin Disraeli. A single standard of values was conducive to a single culture, a single society—and a single nation.

To the degree Victorians succeeded in "bourgeoisifying" the ethos, they also democratized it. That ethos was not, to be sure, an exalted or heroic one. Hard work, sobriety, frugality, foresight—

these were modest, mundane virtues, even lowly ones. But they were virtues within the capacity of everyone; they did not assume any special breeding, or status, or talent, or valor, or grace—or even money. They were common virtues within the reach of common people. They were, so to speak, democratic virtues.

They were also liberal virtues. By putting a premium on ordinary virtues attainable by ordinary people, the ethos located responsibility within each individual. It was no longer only the exceptional, the heroic individual who was the master of his fate; every individual could be his own master. So far from promoting social control, the ethos had the effect of promoting self-control. This was at the heart of Victorian morality: self-control, self-help, self-reliance, self-discipline. A liberal society, the Victorians believed, depended upon a moral citizenry. The stronger the voluntary exercise of morality on the part of each individual—the more internalized that morality—the weaker need be the external, coercive instruments of the state. For the Victorians, morality served as a substitute for law, just as law was a substitute for force.

And so, in a sense, manners were a substitute for morals. Or perhaps not quite a substitute; that puts it too strongly. The Victorians were no Utopians. They were acutely aware of the frailties of human nature, and thus of the need for whatever inducements or sanctions—social, religious, legal, ultimately physical—might be required to encourage virtue and discourage vice. A better image is that of the continuum. Manners were placed in a continuum with morals, as morals were with laws, and laws, as a last resort, with force. It was that great realist, and moralist, Machiavelli, who said, “For as laws are necessary that good manners may be preserved, so there is need of good manners that laws may be maintained.” And it was another great realist and moralist, the mentor of so many eminent Victorians, Edmund Burke, who wrote:

Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarise or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in. They give their whole form and colour to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them.
