

BOOK REVIEW / Michael Rust

Seekers of a moral compass

We are assaulted nowadays by a discordant chorus from media, government, business, even friends and family, offering often diametrically opposed guidance on what virtue consists of.

The contributors to "The Loss of Virtue," a collection of 15 essays by British academics and social commentators, all believe that British and American societies have suffered because standards of morality and honor have withered away, their cultural roots choked off by pervasive relativism.

In a graceful forward, National Review editor John O'Sullivan says that, though old moral virtues once clung to the beachheads of the non-elite segments of our society, their lines of support have been cut off by the influence of the media, the schools and the arts:

"Deprived of both clear moral guidelines and the incentive of his neighbor's moral disapproval, the ordinary sensual man — the Sancho Panza of the suburbs — will find his everyday conduct deteriorating."

This slackening has direct political consequences, Mr. O'Sullivan argues. The result, he says, is an increase in myriad social ills, such as crime, illegitimacy and the deterioration of family life, which in turn leads the government to step in with more bureaucracy as the supposed cure.

The virtues of the past have been replaced by a cult of victimization. This, David Martin points out, "opens up an unlimited credit line" of absolution for any past or future actions that may produce unfortunate consequences.

"Indeed, in some versions this theology holds that the *only* responsible and guilty people are the rulers of the present American empire or the descendants of the British empire. It follows that you can only express a moral opinion provided you first certify your status as a qualified victim or bow before all approved victims in silent humility."

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Victimhood trumps a sense of guilt in today's moral one-upmanship. Mr. Martin maintains that guilt "is to be firmly encouraged in any humane moral psychology. Guilt does not mean a kind of brooding disablement but simply a recognition that our actions have consequences, and could have been otherwise and better."

The contributors here are drawn primarily from the social sciences,

THE LOSS OF VIRTUE: MORAL CONFUSION AND SOCIAL DISORDER IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA
 Edited by Digby Anderson
 National Review Books/Social Affairs Unit, \$19.95, 296 pages

which may explain why the book betrays a reluctance to address the question of whether spiritual experience as transmitted through orthodox religion is a key element in recovering these virtues whose loss is so eloquently decried.

Instead, the loss of virtue to which the title refers is considered in more utilitarian terms. The disappearance of moral foundations, the authors feel, has left a society bogged down in a moral confusion that reduces its ability to create a social system congenial to freedom and order.

"The Loss of Virtue" is a bracing reminder that the philosophical and cultural conflicts of our day go far beyond the immediate political struggles reflected in the headlines. The murkiness that affects so much academic social commentary is refreshingly absent; in its place is an analysis of British and American culture that is both perceptive and clearheaded.

Murkiness is inevitable without any real standards, the authors feel, and the very concept of something called virtue is, after all, a rigorous standard in itself. However, today's obsession with a facile egalitarianism has battered away at the idea of cultural and academic standards.

Paradoxically, it was the elites who created this strange egalitarianism that, in lockstep with moral relativism, has led to an aban-

donment of the universal acknowledgment of moral virtues, even as political language is swamped with pseudo-moralism.

Digby Anderson, director of the Social Affairs Unit, the London-based think tank, points out that during the 1980s, opponents of the free market directed their fire against what they saw as the immorality of capitalism. Yet, if the Left wants to use the language of morality, it has been selective about just what it means by it.

"The new pathetic morality," which consists of "the bleating repetition of the same few overused and hence now largely meaningless words," deals with few virtues, and those that it does promote are "highly sentimentalized or romantic," Mr. Anderson argues.

In contrast, "the harsher virtues," such as fortitude and loyalty in the face of pain and disappointment, reek too much of the unpleasant realities of life for advocates of romantic quasi-morality. These new moralists prefer political activism, which allows them to discover and demand new rights while forgetting that the idea of citizenship originally was a source of as many obligations as rights.

Of course, the question remains of what to do about all this. "The Loss of Virtue" is drenched with the kind of pushy declinism that modern British commentators have excelled in, but still manages to avoid apocalyptic fatalism, even when its contributors do not shrink from pointed analysis.

Contemplating the way in which the sense of location has been minimized in modern study of geography, Dennis O'Keefe remarks, "Today, many children and adults do not know where anything is, including themselves."

In order to find out where we really are, spiritually as well as physically, we must begin to appreciate and develop the older virtues in our own lives and the lives of our families, as Mr. Martin suggests. Individuals must begin to reclaim their own sense of values — their souls, if you please — as the first step in a larger cultural reclamation project.