

The Truth About Values

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This essay is dedicated to the memory of my friend Raymond Boudon and to the

celebration of his inspirational work on reason and choice. As I was starting its preparation,

the sad news arrived that Raymond had died in Paris on the 10th of April 2013, 79 years old.

Among the many crises of our times – banking crisis, economic crisis, debt crisis, euro crisis – is there also, and perhaps at the bottom of it all, a crises in values? I am going to say that there is, but you will have to bear with me and let me explain what I mean. I am not alone, of course, in warning of a decline in values, but my understanding is a bit different, I think, from the standard complaint.

I

Values are beliefs about what is right and proper, what it is right to aim for and what it is proper to do. They tell us something about what we should aspire to in life and something about the rights and wrongs of pursuing those aspirations.

 The beliefs we elevate to values, are first of all, good beliefs. They are not just opinions about what might be right but reflect an understanding of what actually *is* right. Secondly, they are super-beliefs, principles of a higher order that guide us in practical matters in the ordinary business of life. And finally, beliefs are values when they are shared, at least broadly shared, by the members of a group or community. You may believe in the principle of social justice, but that does not make social justice a value in your society if everyone else believes it’s each man for himself.

 Values, then, are a part of the social fabric that surrounds the members of a community. They happen to be invisible elements of the social fabric but are no less real for that. They are what social scientists call ‘institutions.’ Institutions are physical or moral structures that serve as guideposts for people when they try to make sense of their lives. A physical structure is, for example, a speed limit on a road that tells you how fast you should drive. A moral structure is, for example, an agreement that child poverty should be reduced. One of the things I have elsewhere criticised Britain’s New Labour government for is that when they launched their tax-credit policies to combat child poverty, they did this in a technocratic manner without a prior investment to generate a commitment in the political culture to rid a rich country with a growing economy of the shame of child poverty. They did not make the commitment to eradicate child poverty a value in British political culture. It is therefore not surprising that their policies failed.

 Values are obviously man made, they do not fall down upon us from out of the heavens. Yet once they are established, more or less and at least for a while, they sit in the air outside of your or my control and weigh down upon us like commands from up high. They are building blocks in this thing we call ‘society.’ They are shared beliefs about how things are done in these parts, inputs into the social paraphernalia that steer us here or there, much like red and green lights.

II

Values infringe on our freedom to do as we wish and should therefore be bad things. But that is not the way we usually think about them. When politicians go on about values, they are talking about something there should be more of. But why is that? What is it that makes something that limits our freedom of thought and movement a good thing?

 For me, personally, this is not much of a mystery, since I do not have so high an opinion as some about ‘the free individual.’ I think we wretched humans are helpless, that we need guidance, and that we left to our own devices are more likely to get lost than to find fulfilment and happiness.

 But for those who do worship at the alter of the free individual, values are indeed a problem. For them, the individual should be ‘unbound’ – to use a term associated with the philosopher-author Ayn Rand – from anything that limits their free and rational choices, including from values, which in their philosophy are rules imposed by others, hence dictatorship. This is, as we will see, no abstract philosophical scholasticism, but very much an issue of practical policy.

 Now, let me cut off any misunderstanding about myself and freedom. I think freedom is a very good thing, pretty much the ultimate good that people everywhere aspire to. I’ve written a whole book about democracy organised around the idea that freedom is democracy’s purpose. What I however do *not* think, is that freedom is what remains when the individual is unbound. I think that freedom is for a purpose. We don’t want freedom full stop, we want it because it enables us to shape our lives according to what we ourselves value. It then follows that we must also be able to use our liberty sensibly so that the choices we do make actually contribute to advancing what we want. If we use freedom badly, we mess up our lives and in the worst case destroy them. The drug addict will not cure himself by being given free access to drugs, nor the speed-freak by being given a Ferrari, nor will the compulsive shopper become free by the opening up of a new supermarket. I once knew a compulsive shopper. She was addicted to buying things that were on offer. Her home was piled high with boxes of kitchen paper, detergents, shampoos and what not. She was one to make use of the choices that were spread out before her, but her life was miserable, and indeed unfree. If we make counterproductive choices, we are prisoners of our own confusion and therefore not free. Freedom comes to the individual who has space of choice in front of him and the gift to manoeuvre with good sense in that space.

 This view of freedom rests on a certain understanding of the human condition which I have already alluded to. The unbound individual has choice but not necessarily the gift of reason. He who just makes choices hither and thither is not free. Libertarians do not think people make choices hither and thither. They think they automatically make good choices because they think the human animal is by instinct rational. But that was never more than a postulate, and in my opinion a mistaken one. For one thing, the rationality they put such trust in is shallow, simply a matter of choosing whatever advances one’s utility, whatever that be. I lean on a different understanding which I, in homage to my friend Raymond Boudon, the great French sociologist and philosopher, think of a *la raison*. Reason is a matter of making good choices both in preferences and in action. The person who is effective in being evil, or foolish, is not a person of reason. He is, as the economist Amartya Sen has called him, a rational fool. Furthermore, I for my part think that there is nothing instinctive about it, and that for most of us, if we are unbound, the danger is very great indeed that we get it wrong. I am confident in this understanding of human nature. I have learnt it from the greatest of teachers, from Aristotle. ‘Man,’ said Aristotle, in *The Politics*, ‘when perfected is the best of animals, but when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all.’ We humans have the potential for nobility, but we are not noble by instinct. We need, in the words of Aristotle again, ‘to be attuned to the right temper by the force of habit and the influence of teaching.’

III

Some of those who agree with me that there is a crisis in values, think that the crisis is happening out there in the populous and that it is among ordinary people that there is decline, for example, that people are becoming more individualistic, or self-centred, or consumerist, or more insatiable in their expectations, or less capable of happiness and contentment or less solidaristic. There may be something to this. We know from research on attitudes – of which there is a great deal, for example under the auspices of *World Values Survey* and the *European Values Study* – that there are many changes afoot in the way people think about themselves and each other. But we need to be careful with the conclusions we draw from that kind of evidence. What we can measure with some confidence is attitudes, but attitudes are not the same as values.

 One of the things we know, for example, is that people’s views of democracy and government is changing. For a long time, more people have become more critical of the way they are governed and more critical of those who govern them. That is observed throughout the democratic world as a long term trend. This is a problem for democracy because democracy depends on a capital of trust between the rulers and the ruled. That trust is wearing thin we can see in another trend, that of lower participation in democratic elections.

 It is also a problem for political leaders. They face a more critical public and enjoy less respect. They feel that their work is getting more difficult and less appreciated, and they see that people are changing in the way they respond to politics. It is, by the way, not only political leaders who face this difficulty, but also leaders in civil and economic life. There is a general trend of less trust not only in politics but also in, for example, business and religious affairs. The end of deference, it has been called. It is not easy for leaders to experience that they are not trusted, and from where they sit that looks very much like something going lost out there among ordinary people. It is therefore not difficult to understand that changing attitudes of this kind are seen from above as shifts in public values and taken as evidence of a downwards slide in social cohesion and morality.

 But in the case of attitudes to democracy, at least, that is almost certainly wrong. If we look carefully at the evidence, and this again is true from country to country, we see that there is no falling away in people’s allegiance to the ideas and principles of democracy, but that there is, within that stability in attitudes, less deference in what they feel that democratic governance is doing for them. That again might be a result of rising expectations, which leaders will be tempted to see as unrealistic expectations, but it could also be a response to democratic governments just not performing well enough. People are more knowledgeable and better educated than ever and may be in a better position to judge how their leaders are performing. Democratic governance is not always an impressive display of good management in the interest of ordinary people, to put it carefully, and the ability of politics to deliver has been curtailed by the increasing power of capital in a globalised economy. For me, the end of deference looks more like a realistic grading of poor performance than of unappreciative people denying leaders the trust they deserve.

IV

So I do think there is a crisis in values. But I don’t think that crisis is happening out there among ordinary people. I think we should look upwards to those who are exercising power and that we should be less agitated about whether or not ordinary people are up to the complexities of modern life.

 To justify that proposition, let me take you through some examples, mainly from Britain, and look to some sites of leadership in contemporary life. And let me start at the very top in importance, with football. In Britain, as elsewhere, professional football has grown unbelievably rich, a result, if I understand it right, mainly of what the providers of the game can extract from commercial television. The game is simply awash with money. That has given the leaders new powers, and, one would like to think, new responsibilities. But in looking to where they have gone with those powers and responsibilities, what is most conspicuous is what they have *not* done?

 First, they have shared out the money among a small group of elite players and leaders. British football, below the top level, is a poor game, and for all the money there is little investment in its future. In a game where the top teams are brilliant, thanks to the buying of players from all over the world, the rest of the game is so depleted that it cannot provide the national team with a decent side.

 (Actually, not even the top teams are all that brilliant. In the European Champions League, both finalists in 2013 were German teams. In Germany, football clubs are still clubs that play football, with a little business on the side, whereas in Britain the top ones are businesses that play a little football on the side. German football remains careful to invest massively in young players so that the top teams sit on a solid foundation.)

 Second, the game has been and is marred with many blemishes, such as unsafe terraces, cheating, hooliganism and racism. Much has been done to rectify some of these problems, but not primarily by the game’s own leadership. Improved safety, for example, has been imposed by government authorities and the police. In the ugly problem of racism, it is the absence or timidity of action or even signals from the top of the game that stands out, and it seems, as with hooliganism, that the captains are content to leave it to others to clean up.

 I draw some lessons from this example. If people refuse deference to those who hold the power of governance in football, I think that is more a matter of leaders getting what they deserve than of followers being guilty of unrealistic expectations. Further, it shows the danger of giving anyone too much money to play around with, with not enough rules about how to do it. These leaders have been left free to manage the money as they wish, and it seems clear to me that they have gone wrong in the choices they have made. Overall, the lesson is that any deficit of values here is at the top with those who are ‘special’ and not at the bottom with those who are ‘ordinary.’

 Is this misery caused by bad people being in charge in football? I would not think so. The people who run this game and those who share the money that is washing around are probably no better or worse than most of us. Their problem is that they do not have enough of institutions around them to give them guidance and direction. They are, to go back to Aristotle, too much separated from law and justice and not sufficiently attuned to the right temper.

 Which leads me to a second example, that of the banks. Banks with too much of other people’s money to play with went off the rails in a way that brought Western capitalism to meltdown. I’m unable here to go into any analysis proper of the causes of economic collapse in the United States and Britain and the dire consequences for other economies linked into them, except to say that for me there was no surprise. The banks had been deregulated whereby the institutions that could give bank leaders guidance had been removed, with inevitable rudderless leadership and bad management following. Lest you should think this is wisdom in hindsight, I take the liberty of mentioning to you that I some years ago, in the middle of the boom, had the opportunity to write a series of articles in the leading business newspaper in my native Norway, *Dagens Næringsliv*, on the need for capitalism, in which system I have been and continue to be a believer, to be protected against itself by an architecture of robust regulations.

 What interests me here is what followed. Major banks destroyed themselves and much of the economy they were supposed to serve. Massively, people lost their savings, their homes, their jobs. Most of the banks that had made themselves worthless, were salvaged and able to stay in business. One might have thought, in these circumstances, that bank leaders would have been at the forefront of trying to make sense of what had gone wrong and of finding ways to insure against similar catastrophe happening again. But nothing of the kind. Like the football leaders, they kept their heads down and their eyes narrowly on their own good, left it to others to clean up, and did whatever they could to protect themselves against any intrusion into their freedom to conduct business as they saw fit. As soon as they felt able, they came out of hiding to pronounce that banking was sound and should have deference. You may remember that Bob Diamond, then head of Barclays, on the 11th of January 2011, in a much publicised speech, said it was time to stop the bashing of bankers, move on and let the banks get on with business.

 The failure of bank leaders to take action to clean up their business and to send out signals to their underlings to get their affairs in order had further catastrophic consequences. A year after Mr. Diamond called for respect, his own bank was caught out in criminal price-rigging of the Libor to manipulate global interest rates for the benefit of banks and the detriment of savers and borrowers. The bank agreed to a £290 million fine settlement and Mr. Diamond had to go. More was to follow. The Royal Bank of Scotland was caught at having contributed to the Libor rigging and fined £390 million, as was the Swiss banking giant UBS, accepting a fine of $1.5 billion dollars in the United States. In late 2012, HSBC agreed to a fine of $1.9 billion dollars in the United States for having allowed itself to be used to launder a river of drug money flowing out of [Mexico](http://www.reuters.com/places/mexico?lc=int_mb_1001) and for other banking lapses. In early 2013, the oldest Swiss bank, Wegelin, announced that it was shutting down and going out of business, after having agreed to a fine of $57.8 million for having helped US taxpayers to evade tax payments.

 So this is not a pretty business. Are bankers bad people? Surely not. But their working conditions have been bad. Deregulation took away their institutions and left them helpless. With too little of institutional protection, it went wrong for them. It’s obvious, is it not: if we set someone to manage our money we should want the way they do it to be regulated. As in the football game, the final failure was a failure of leadership. In fairness to the banking profession, it should be added that there were warnings from within the family, if from second cousins. While Mr. Diamond was flexing his muscles and demanding respect, the head of C. Hoare, Britain’s most eccentric (and highly profitable) old-school bank, said, ‘We have had this massive scare, but what was the cause? A lack of moral compass and a lack of understanding of the nature of debt and civic responsibility. Changing capital ratios will not change that.’

 For a third example, let me turn to Parliament. Their equivalent of the banks’ cheating scandals was the claims scandal. In 2009, it was revealed that a large number of MPs for a number of years had successfully claimed for private expenses from Parliament’s system for compensation of business expenses. Some of the cases were no-nonsense cheating and criminal, and some substantial, but most of them were relatively modest and more in the category of carelessness, and it needs to be added that many MPs were completely untainted.

 I’ve personally never been as excited over this scandal as some were. The criminal cases should obviously be dealt with, but for the most part it was mess rather than theft. But it deserves reflecting on how it came about that many MPs systematically erred on the side of benefitting their own purse rather than on the side of prudence. My explanation is the one I have used above: an absence of institutions and an absence of leadership. The claims regime in Parliament was lax, and there was a sentiment floating in the air that a bit of extra from the claims pot was fair compensation for low pay. This sentiment was not slapped down but rather stimulated by the leaders in Parliament. In that situation, it was unavoidable that MPs would sometimes help themselves to a bit more than they probably should have, and it all rolled on until it escalated into a scandal that has caused Parliament a lasting loss of esteem. Parliament was not helped by further bad leadership, when the then Speaker and other leaders, instead of taking hold of the problem, tried to cover it up and prevent it from being made public. MPs are like bankers and football managers good people, and with the protection of good institutions and leadership they would have stayed straight.

 Finally, let me take the phone hacking scandal in the tabloid press. I carefully say ‘the tabloid press.’ There has been a great deal of bashing of ‘the press,’ but that is wrong. It was, remember, the press that uncovered the scandal. But things did go seriously wrong in the tabloids with a profession abandoning its own most elementary standards. Hacking into people’s mobile phones proved to be an easy way of getting hold of private information and became a widely used technique. The leadership in the relevant papers did their best to cover it up, and when it could no longer be contained to hid behind a lie that it had been the work of a few rogue reporters. We now know that it was a widely used and generally known and condoned technique. Behaviour that any sensible person would know to be illegal was made routine.

 There are similarities in these examples. They are all from the top. I’m not talking about little failings on the fringes, but about big wrongdoings at the centre of the nation’s establishments. All of them refer to practices that are straightforwardly wrong. When football bosses found themselves in charge of lots and lots of money, it was wrong that they did not take care to invest in the future of the game. The fraud, cheating and criminality we have seen in the banking sector is just baffling. That MPs took to petty cheating, and in some cases not so petty, is profoundly sad. In these cases, people failed up against the freedom of being able to spend other people’s money. The goings-on in the tabloid press is up there with banking abuses in being damaging. In all the examples, it is by and large good people doing bad things. Do not for a moment think that that this immorality can be explained by a coincidence of immoral people having become football managers, bankers, MPs or journalists. The truth is that in the circumstances, most of us would be in the rot ourselves. What we see in all the examples is two clear things. First, cultures had evolved in which the rules were: do as you want, do whatever works, whatever is profitable. And secondly, we see a failure of leadership. Either the leaders are the wrongdoers, as in the football example, or they let their sides down in how they instructed their troops. In neither banking, nor Parliament, nor tabloid journalism did the leaderships define standards of proper practice and follow up and implement such standards. Instead, they more or less clearly or more or less silently condoned, accepted or encouraged the ‘do as you like’ cultures in their respective areas of responsibility.

V

So what are values and what they are for? Values, I’ve said, are shared beliefs about right, wrong, propriety and so on. We often think that values sit in people’s minds in the form of attitudes. That is the basis for the view that there is a crisis in values out there among ordinary people. But that is not the nature of values. Values do not sit in me or in you, that’s not where they live. They are institutions and sit in the space between us, in society. All of us, individually, are receptors of the invisible signals that these institutions send out. And we react with astonishing sensitivity to what come to us, or not, from these institutions. We really do do as we are told. A society in which good values prevail, is a society in which people will be influenced to good attitudes because they are surrounded by strong institutions. If you want to understand the state of values in a society, don’t worry about people – they are as they are and good enough – look to the institutions of their society.

 Where then do such shared beliefs come from? That is not easily said, and I certainly have no full answer. They clearly come from history and tradition. A society that has had good order up to now, is likely to continue to be ordered. And they come from culture, from the way we speak to each other and behave towards each other. If it is commonplace for people to express the view that laws should be obeyed, we are each of us more likely to believe that we should indeed obey the laws, even when that is inconvenient.

 We all share responsibility for maintaining good institutions by being good citizens. But that responsibility is not shared equally in a population. Some carry more responsibility than others. You can like it or not as much as you want, but it is an inescapable fact that social order, including the preservation of strong institutions, depends on leadership. The guidance that we human animals need in order not to get lost in life, is that we need to be *governed*. It is in our own interest that we are governed, since otherwise, as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes warned, it’s war of all against all. The ultimate outcome of not being governed is not freedom but death. Those who are in positions of authority – be it in politics, business, football, the press or wherever, and again whether they like it or not – carry an extra responsibility. Strong institutions will not evolve and persevere unless there is good leadership.

 To identify and understand the crisis of values, then, it is to the toffs we should look more than to the plebs. And when we look to the toffs, it is the way they exercise leadership we should look to in particular. Values live as institutions where they are maintained and where awareness of them is maintained. No more than physical traffic lights continue to function if engineers do not take care of the maintenance, do moral traffic lights continue to work if leaders do not do their job.

 In the examples I have given, the value that is absent is the one that says, ‘there is a difference between right and wrong, and when you make choices in your business you should strive to do what is right and avoid what is wrong.’ That value has been outcompeted by a more convenient guidance that says, ‘you can do as you like and go with whatever is profitable for your own good.’ This displacement has happened in a big way. The distorted use of choice in football, banking, politics and journalism are *huge* distortions. Youngsters who want to play football are not taken care of. Banks cannot be trusted as custodians of our savings. MPs have lost their moral authority as national leaders. Press freedom is under threat.

 How has this nihilistic assault on good, solid and sensible values come about? It has come, as it would have to, from the top, and it is possible to say exactly how it has happened. The blame lies at the feet of two persons whom we can name. The do-as-you-like culture has arisen from the glorification of the unbound individual who lives in an environment of unbound capitalism. It has come out of the vanguards of what has for a while has been thought of as advanced capitalism, from Britain and the United States. And there, the culprits-in-chief have been a certain Mrs. Thatcher and a certain Mr. Reagan.

 These were both political leaders of monumental consequence. They shaped their times and the times that were to follow, and their influence cannot be overstated. Political developments into the twenty-first century in Britain and America, and beyond, would not have been the same without the influence of these two towering personalities. They exercised influence in two ways. First, and most importantly, they changed political cultures. They changed *ideas*. They attacked the post-war consensus in our part of the world that government is an instrument for the good that should be used actively, if prudently, to shape economic and social conditions so as to make it practicable for people to live good lives and to protect those who are the least fortunate. It is because they went to the core of the political culture to reshape ideas that they were able to be influential while in office and to have their influence continue to work after they were out. I have mentioned above the example of New Labour trying to abolish child poverty without first doing anything with the nation’s ideas about poverty. They tried to force social democratic policies into a Thatcherite culture, which could not work. Real political influence goes through ideas. One man who understood that was the economist John Maynard Keynes. On the last page of his *General Theory*, he wrote about ‘the gradual encroachment of ideas’ and how ‘ideas, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else.’

 The second thing they did was to change public policy. They set in motion the destructive deregulation of the financial services that with time would bring upon their countries the worst economic crisis since 1929. But beyond that they actually changed policies less than is often though. They talked about rolling back the welfare state, but neither of them practically did much of that. They talked about reducing taxes, and through ‘the gradual encroachment of ideas’ that eventually became gospel, but in their own time not much happened. Under Mr. Reagan, for example, taxes went up in seven of his eight years. However, because they won on ideas, it fell to later leaders to do the practicalities. That has included the regimes of Mr. Blair in Britain and Mr. Clinton in the United States. They both presented themselves, and continue to do so, as modern progressives, but were just handmaidens of the Reagan-Thatcher counterrevolution. They should have re-regulated for orderly capitalism but instead continued the deregulation and left capitalism unbound to implode.

 Both Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Reagan put their ideas in clear language. Mrs. Thatcher did that in an interview in 1987. She was criticizing the ‘many people’ who have a tendency to ‘cast their problem on society,’ and continued, ‘you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.’ Mr. Reagan spoke his mind in his first inaugural address, in 1981, when he said that ‘government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.’

 These were not throw-away remarks. Here were serious leaders promoting their sincere ideas, stoking the cult of the unbound individual who is free from being governed. Their messages were steps in the depletion of moral institutions. As these leaders spoke, the idea of responsibility was crumbling and the indulgence in do-as-you-like convenience given credence. That convenience then spread and infested outlooks and practices throughout society, such as in football, banking, politics and journalism. ‘The financial crisis,’ says Pope Francis, ‘has its origin in a profound human crisis. We have created new idols. The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is lacking in any true human goal.’

VI

We are still prisoners of the Reagan-Thatcher counterrevolution. So profound has their influence on ideas been that not even the experience of economic meltdown within unbound capitalism has restored faith in the good sense that it is in our own interest, be we investors or consumers, that we are governed and not ‘separated from law and justice.’

 Our task now, for those of us who fly the flag of *la raison*, is to rebuild institutions. Forget moralising. Recently, for example, international businesses have been shamed for not paying more taxes than they are obliged to by prevailing rules, but what’s lacking in this game is governance more than morality. Those we should shame are not business people who operate within bad rules, or even those who make the bad rules, but those who persist with the idea that even good rules are bad things.

 Institutions need to be rebuilt as they have been destroyed, with ideas. For counter-counterrevolution, we must restore faith in truthful ideas. We must explain that we as individuals need more than our own rationality to prosper in life. Against primitive do-as-you-like-ism we should restore the idea that government is good. Against the wreckers of social structure, we should restore the idea that regulation is good. Against the worship of the unbound individual, we should reject the idea that society is nothing and restore the idea that it is real and everything. Of course, by government I mean good government, by regulation I mean proper regulation and by society I mean orderly society. But do not let the enemy use these qualifications to twist the truth. Government, regulation and society are goods to be wanted and necessities to be maintained. There is a battle to be fought and it should be taken to the battlefield of ideas.

 The immediate test before us is in the banking sector. The bankers still have too much of other people’s money to play with too freely. That’s not good for us, it’s not good for them, and it’s not good for capitalism. Some new rules are being imposed, but, as we have seen, ‘changing capital ratios’ will not do the job. The big banks are too big and are in too many contrasting businesses at the same time. The leaders don’t know what is going on in their own organisations and cannot govern them. When they are responsible for both protecting savings and gambling with entrusted capital, they cannot give their underlings clear guidance and straight signals. Here, definitely, there is a deficit of values. It’s still up in the air whether the big banks are to be broken up so that we can return to the more orderly banking that prevailed before the City Big Bang in 1986. The right action against monopoly capitalism is, since the days of President Theodore Roosevelt in America, to bust the trusts. The big banks are trusts that pervert functioning capitalism. If they were broken up, I’d start to believe that we were starting to lift ourselves out of moral crisis.

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Science is about truth, as art is about beauty. The social sciences have not been conspicuously successful in uncovering truths about the human condition. Some in our fields do not think there are final truths to be found, that there are many truths depending on how you look at it, and that one truth is as good as another. Some think it depends on how you define matters. If you ask how much poverty there is, they may say it depends on how you define it – as if definitions create reality. Sometimes, truths are buried under tangled concepts, methods too fancy for their own good, or impenetrable jargon and pain bad writing.

This project explores some core concepts and questions in social philosophy. It seeks to sum up forty years or more of research and reflection. It is guided by an idea of simplicity. The truth is simple. If you muddle it up, you will not find it. If you have not uncovered its simple essence, you are not yet there. It is dedicated to brevity and to the prose of ordinary language.

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