

Ethical Meltdown – the Hunt for a Cure

Version 0.9 May 15, 2006

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My perception is that an "ethical meltdown" of the leadership of the country is occurring. Going far beyond "an eye for an eye" to major military offenses incited by our worst fears (Stephen King* statesmanship), the torture of foreign prisoners, unauthorized wiretapping of citizens, the Enron scandal, the trial of its CEO, the ongoing evaporation of funds from employee retirement plans at other major U.S. corporations, and the struggle that prosecutors have in proving any wrong-doing in all this, come to mind. Action of any kind makes for "news", but outcomes suggest that greed, wits, and testosterone oppose wisdom.

Leadership sets the tone. When President Clinton defended himself in impeachment by arguing about the definition of "is" before the U.S. Senate, he taught the future leaders of the Bush Administration that no line of public argument is too outlandish in the pursuit of personal advantage, and they learned the lesson well. The political leaders' ethics influence the business leaders' ethics, and vice versa.

I see no traditional remedies that will stem the tide of ethical decline. One measure of predicting probable success of a remedy is:

the likelihood that the damage caused by President Clinton's impeachment conduct will be undone.

In Shakespeare's time, English began evolving into the highly useful tool for achieving deceptions that it is today, complementary to the sword, as intended. I invite you to consider the following, as part of a search "outside the box" for a remedy.

Candidate definitions :

"honesty" =

"Striving to provide information and understandings which inform the decisions of other people to their Earthly benefit in the short and long term."

"dishonesty" =

"Obscuring or withholding information or understandings which would inform the decisions of other people to their Earthly benefit in the short or long term."

Then (a tautology):

In honesty we can say that any society preferring "individual advantage" to "the common good" will manifest progressively more dishonesty in a growing diversity of ways.

* Stephen King authors horror novels.

Bear with me, because the definitions aren't tautologies— whereas the present English dictionary definitions of honesty, that I've seen, are such a smorgasbord of meaning that they are laughable, very useful in claiming honesty without effort, but laughable. Presently silence passes for honesty. Snitches motivated by *honesty* are often disrespected; reports of the tribulations of many whistle-blowers come to mind. Committees should redefine English social words for maximum synergy and minimum confusion. The candidate definitions of *honesty* and *dishonesty* need improvement; for example, allowing me poetic license:

Life insurance salespersons would manifest neither *honesty* nor *dishonesty*.

How many universities around the world have a "Departments of Honesty"? For me, that's a shocking question... in particular, that departments of Philosophy haven't and don't teach honesty as a skill (that I'm aware of); the teaching supports winning an ethics question debate – on either side. Training in debate harvests *dishonesty*. Yale's inspiring Latin motto: "Lux et Veritas" (= Light & Truth) raises the operational question: Imparted to whom?

"And this, too, shall pass away." *Dishonesty* will pass away last. Utopia is beyond human reach. Is word-definition-*dishonesty* just an inevitable part of human nature? When the powers-that-be want to feed, Heaven help the weak who interfere; if new English word definitions allowed communication with more *honesty*, would any significant fraction of the people presently benefiting from *dishonesty* want to learn the new definitions? How could you tell whether someone was communicating in Old English or New English? Doing anything "outside the box" is risky; even a well-conceived transformation of our ethical attitudes may severely test the social order in this country.

But the rise and fall of nations is also a given; doing nothing in the face of the ethical decline of some of our leaders is risky. Governmental collapses, which can be a nasty experience for citizens, became déjà vu in China's 3000+ year history; Chinese bureaucrats evolved a philosophy for perceiving, in advance, when the existing government's time had passed.

Is *honesty* worth the bother? I vote yes. Children 75 years hence could use New English with less uncertainty, perhaps properly seeing the language as a peacefully instructive instrument rather than an instrument of empire. As the ethical bar rises again in America, followers will see that the objective is to prepare for getting over the bar in setting the tone when it is their turn to lead.

If the broad search for alternatives to ethical decline, and in particular:

- 1) *Further rationale for improving English word definitions* and/or
- 2) *Guidelines for dealing off the top of the deck* and/or
- 3) *Improving our philosophy of philosophies*

become of interest to you, then:

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is a worthy read.