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Moral Wisdom and the Recovery of Virtue

Peter Kurti

We live in a very different public square from the one with which we were familiar ten or even five years ago. And it will look very different in another five or ten years. Much of this transformation can be attributed to the rapid rise of social media. We are much less 'place-focused' now and this has caused a huge shift in our sense of social and individual identity.

So what would it mean to rebuild and promote a sense of virtue and a moral—or, as it's sometimes called, *practical*—wisdom in the *public square* of the digital age?

The reason I call for the *recovery* of virtue is that I think we have experienced a loss of certainty about self, place and community. And with that loss of certainty has come a loss of confidence in our identity and in our values.

In the view of psychologist Howard Gardner:

> Any society that hopes to endure must ensure that [its values] are passed on in viable form to succeeding generations. For, if we give up lives marked by truth, beauty, and goodness [virtue]—or at least the perennial quest for them—to all intents and purposes, we resign ourselves to a world where nothing is of value, where anything goes.

What I'm suggesting is that we should promote the practice of moral wisdom and the recovery of virtue by means of my four-point strategy to help us flourish and live well in the twenty-first century public square.

The modern *agora*

The public square of the twenty-first century is quite different from the *agora* of the ancient world. The agora was the gathering place in a Greek city-state, the centre of spiritual, political and cultural life. It was a physical meeting place.

In our own age, we no longer have to meet face to face to exchange ideas or information or even to argue. And we certainly don't have to do it in a single physical place.

Canadian business analyst Don Tapscott coined the term *ideagoras* to describe places on the Internet where large numbers of people and organisations meet to exchange ideas and solutions.

Like a physical marketplace that connects buyers and sellers, problems and problem-solvers, the ideagora connects people who seek solutions with those who think they can offer them.

Ideagoras also allow people and organisations to canvass opinions, solicit feedback, and promulgate points of view that can range from the serene to the obscene.

Tapscott calls the ideagora 'a marketplace for uniquely qualified minds.'

I like the concept of ideagoras. But meeting places present their own problems. The agora was not necessarily a comfortable place. When you ventured there, you might get jostled and jeered at, experience the delight of victory, or suffer the ignominy of defeat.

You had to be ready for anything and everything before you set up in the agora and invited exchange of one form or another. And ideagoras are the same.

For example, in the collaborative wiki-world of the ideagora, almost all notions of hierarchy and authority have been overturned and ignored.

The shared values of individuals form new solidarities. And the power of tradition quickly gives way to the power of individual drive and ambition.

For instance, feedback posted on Facebook gives marketing directors no end of trouble. In fact, they are wondering whether the benefits of being on Facebook outweigh the risks.

Target was recently skewered in the ideagora. A social media campaign against the retailer began with a complaint posted by a Port Macquarie mother, who thought Target sold clothing that made young girls 'look like tramps.' She said so on Target's Facebook page. Her post attracted some 60,000 *likes* and almost 3,000 comments.

Pity the poor souls in the marketing department.

Is there any way out of this brave, new and disorienting world? No! say the social media analysts.

There's huge, untapped potential in companies' use of social media technology. They simply cannot afford to duck it.

A recent report from the research firm Gartner said failing to communicate with customers on social networks could be as damaging to companies as not answering phone calls or e-mails.

'Social networking is here to stay,' says Thomas Tudehope, a media analyst. 'It has drastically altered the way we communicate and share information.'

There is no going back.

Tudehope says, historically, it was all about companies' posting their own content, but now they are shifting the way they handle social media.

It used to be: 'What are we going to post on our page?' Now it is the other way: 'What are users going to say on our page?'

So who is responsible?

In the twenty-first century meeting place of the ideagora, companies are responsible for monitoring feedback and comments posted on corporate Facebook pages.

Individuals may—and do—post whatever they choose to say. But it's the companies themselves that must ensure those posts are not racist, sexist, obscene or inaccurate.

Let's think of this change of outlook in terms of a shift from *push* factors to *pull* factors.

The marketers have used social media to *push* a message: Come to our store or site, they say, look at our products, and please buy

them. They use social media to split the market, target customers, and differentiate themselves from competitors.

And such pushes have got companies like Target into trouble because marketing departments still aren't adept at handling the fallout of a message misfiring.

However, the shift to *pull* factors has come about because social media sites like Facebook draw people into a company's online world. Once company and customer come together in the ideagora, anything can happen.

And when the message misfires, the people you want handling the fallout are not the advertisers and marketers who are so good at *pushing*.

Rather, you want the public relations people who are much better equipped for dealing with fallout, feedback and, sometimes, plain foolishness, from customers.

As one adviser on social media strategy put it, 'Even though the social media process can't be totally controlled, it needs to be managed.'

The emperor's new clothes

Indeed, a company's entire involvement with social media needs to be managed carefully because it's not just the interaction between participants that makes this a pressing matter but also privacy issues.

The very trade of the social networking sites is dealing with and extracting personal data. It's not just that they have altered our perceptions of what we can and can't share. Social media has also challenged our notions of privacy and what we can realistically expect—or hope—to remain private.

But the reduction in privacy has all been user-driven. As Tudehope notes, it's the users who freely give away their personal information, whether prompted to do so or not.

This free flow of personal information give-away means that searches, whether on Google or Amazon or any other similar site, are increasingly personalised.

Amazon remembers your browsing history; iTunes recommends other books, music or movies you might like; and Google tailors its searches to your previously expressed interests.

Far from being the window to the world we once thought it was, the Internet is beginning to look more like a mirror.

The cumulative effect of all those personalised searches is that what Google gives us is not so much a window into another world, but a reflection of our own. Search results are attuned to our own preoccupations.

And the result? The result is that the more we search, the less we learn, according to British writer Brian Appleyard.

It's what Silicon Valley apostate Jaron Lanier, one of the creators of artificial reality, calls a *hive mind*. Far from being a thoughtful mass of independent individuals, he says the Internet has created a blind collective driven by a desire to extirpate the human.

The increasing number of *meta* sites available on the Internet aggregate from other aggregators. Lanier calls it a form of *digital Maoism*.

The collective mind

Much of what we read on the Internet, Lanier says, consists of what a collectivity algorithm derives from what other collectivity algorithms derived from what collectives chose from what a population of mostly amateur writers wrote anonymously.

Appleyard has remarked that these collectivity algorithms can yield surprising, amusing but sometimes unhelpful results.

Autocorrect is a good example of the way a collectivity algorithm can mangle our intentions.

Actor and author Stephen Fry tweeted: 'Just typed "better than hanging around the house rating bisexuals" to a friend. Thanks, autocorrect. Meant "eating biscuits".'

Autocorrect is not, of course, a single entity. It is an assortment of competing probabilistic algorithms drawing on massive collectives of constantly evolving lists of words that make up 'the parlance of our times.'

And we are relying on it more and more. As *New York Times* columnist James Gleick observed wryly, 'People who yesterday unlearned arithmetic will soon forget how to spell. One by one we are outsourcing our mental functions to the global prosthetic brain.'

Well, in the face of rapid technological change, we might be tempted simply to pull in our heads and wait for it all to go away. Or we might shrug our shoulders and say nothing can be done because it's our destiny.

However, as Appleyard notes, all these new devices, gadgets and applications emerge from a particular culture at a particular time, and they involve particular choices.

These choices, in turn, are shaped by the rhetoric of those claiming that these devices and applications can change our lives from within.

'Such change "from within" born on a tidal wave of connectivity,' says Appleyard, 'can alter radically our sense of self and society.'

If Appleyard is right—and I suspect he is right in that the rhythms of our social and self-awareness are disturbed by new forms of connection and collaboration—then the question is: How are we to retain our sense of moral bearing and orientation amid the thrum of the hive?

Or as G.E.M. Anscombe asks: In this rapidly evolving world of wiki-living, how are we to ensure that we flourish and live well?

Morality, virtue and courage

If we attend to the exercise of moral wisdom and the recovery of virtue, we will be better equipped to recalibrate our sense of self and our sense of society.

The first principle of morality is to work hard at thinking clearly, said Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher.

Matthew Taylor, CEO of the London-based Royal Society of Arts, is a little less succinct but he thinks along similar lines.

Taylor says when it comes to our ability to address moral questions together in society, a key issue is 'whether established patterns and ideas of authority, solidarity and ambition can adapt to modern challenges.'

Well, if we are to pursue forms of life that allow us to flourish and live well, we have to think more clearly and adapt more confidently.

I believe that in order to recover virtue, we need not invent so much as to renew an awareness of being wise, of being equipped to 'do the right thing,' as the philosophers put it.

In thinking about 'doing the right thing,' the ancient philosophers gave us the concept of *virtue*, the concept of something that makes its possessor good.

For example, philosophers call courage a virtue because when we know in our heart what we need to do in a situation, we also know there is nothing else for us but to *do it.*

Virtues create habits, and habits shape what we do. So, when we feel the strength of a virtue such as courage, new habits form. And those habits shape what we do.

We might, then, think of a virtuous person as a morally good person who acts and thinks rightly.

But we don't necessarily admire courage in a desperado who might be fuelled to do wicked things because of their disposition, things that a timid person, lacking the virtue of courage, would not do.

A courageous desperado is not necessarily an admirable or morally virtuous person.

Courage without good judgment is blind. Courage without perseverance is short-lived. Courage without a sense of one's own abilities is foolhardy. Suddenly, what we thought of as a virtue we now think of as a fault.

Virtue, then, has to be more than a tendency or a habit—like being a tea drinker. Not so much a tendency, perhaps, as a *complexity*.

Let's think of virtue as a complex of traits concerned with actions, reactions, emotions, values and desires. And let's think of the virtuous person as someone who has a certain complex mindset.

So the ancients gave us the concept of *practical* or *moral wisdom* to round out this idea of virtue. Moral wisdom is the kind of wisdom that brings the raw, natural form of virtue, such as the desperado's courage, to perfection.

Moral wisdom is what we find in the virtuous and morally mature human being—the kind of person who has just the right kind of commonsense, understanding and experience to do the right thing in any given situation.

Let's call moral wisdom a capacity for 'situational appreciation,' a capacity that will allow the person who has moral wisdom to live well in every situation.

Qualities such as life experience, emotional maturity, and a capacity to evaluate relative merits and deficiencies all coalesce in this sketch of the morally wise person.

The morally wise person is one whose moral compass is reliably set—one 'who understands what is truly worthwhile, truly important, and thereby truly advantageous in life.'

The Age of Networked Intelligence

Don Tapscott says just as the Agrarian Age gave way to the Industrial Age, the Industrial Age has given way to what he calls the Age of Networked Intelligence.

That's the age in which we are living: the Age of Networked Intelligence.

What's of pressing importance to us today is the recovery of virtue and the pursuit of moral wisdom in the ideagoras of the Age of Networked Intelligence.

We are all capable of becoming better people, of learning how to flourish and live well in the Age of Networked Intelligence. But we can't do this alone.

In fact, according to Aristotle, the full realisation of the rational powers required for good moral character isn't something we can achieve on our own.

Aristotle argued that good moral character only develops when society provides opportunities for virtuous behaviour through its political and social institutions.

A virtuous society is more conducive to virtuous individuals. And the spread of individual virtuous behaviour becomes, in turn, the means whereby virtue is promoted as a feature of society.

Virtuous living becomes a self-fulfilling, self-regenerating cycle.

Three virtues

We may well wonder whether virtues are the same for everyone. Some people have argued that virtues change over time. And indeed, people are very different. Yet we face the same basic problems and have the same basic needs.

On that basis, I want to propose three virtues as worthy of our attention because they have a significant—but not exhaustive—part to play in the health of every human society.

We need to attend to the business of cultivating each of these virtues and transmitting them to the generations following us.

Courage. Danger can arise in any situation and we need courage to face that danger. There may be times when we even need the courage of the desperado.

Generosity. There are always people who are less well-off and in need. We need generous spirits with which to meet the less well-off. They too are our neighbours.

Loyalty. A 'persistent attachment' to a relationship that aims to secure the interests of the other person, even when it becomes costly to do so.

Loyalty is grounded in trust, and we can experience loyalty in friendship—although we know that the concept of *friend* has changed greatly with the rise of social media—in marriage, and in the workplace. Clearly, loyalty may be forfeited.

The adage goes: 'When an organisation wants you to do right, it asks for your integrity; when it wants you to do wrong, it demands your loyalty.'

Yet everyone needs friendship and love, particularly with a growing cultural tolerance for users of social media being *alone together*, as the phrase goes. And friendship and love, whether they are reinforced by *online friendships*, are grounded in loyalty.

Well, as Mark Twain once said: 'To be good and virtuous is a noble thing, but to teach others to be good and virtuous is nobler still—and much, much easier.'

The fab four

The virtues don't give answers or solutions. They must be cultivated over time and practised repeatedly so that *good* habits and dispositions may be nurtured and transmitted.

The Age of Networked Intelligence provides an extraordinary opportunity to do just this, and so to recover virtue and to develop the practice of moral wisdom.

The four points of my strategy for promoting the practice of moral wisdom and the recovery of virtue are very simple—obvious, even.

Community. Virtue is defined and lived in community—even in the twenty-first century community of the ideagora. Community is the context in which truth is tested and social identity experienced and enforced. And it is here that the values of moral excellence are encountered. We need to attend to community.

Role models. Virtues are modelled by the exemplars of the ages. These exemplars may be the heroes of historical tradition or the saints of religious tradition.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt has identified the emotion of *elevation* that we feel when we see another person do something virtuous. Feelings of elevation lead, in turn, to increased virtuous behaviour.

Flawed though they invariably are, these exemplars embody the virtue and practical wisdom that can inspire and encourage us. We need to discover our role models.

Habits. Virtues must be practised repeatedly so that good habits may be formed and strengthened. The saying 'Like activities produce like dispositions' shows habits are crucial and the importance of cultivating good habits.

Character. The word *character* comes from a Greek word for a mark impressed upon a coin. It has come to mean the collection of distinctive, identifying qualities of a person. We might think of this assemblage of qualities as a stamp upon us used to identify our moral temperament. We need to build strength of character.

So there they are, the four points of my strategy for the practice of moral wisdom and the recovery of virtue in the Age of Networked Intelligence.

In the end

Philosophers of information technology have been pondering for some time now whether social media technology helps us cultivate the virtuous ideal of knowing what it is to live well, and of pursuing that life in this new age.

These technologies have quickly worked themselves into the moral fabric of our daily life. They have not only transformed our social landscape but also changed the very moral habits and practices with which we navigate it.

Being mindful of the four points in our daily life can give shape to our experiences, foster moral excellence, and set us on course to flourish and live well in the ideagoras of the twenty-first century.

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For more information about CIS or to become a member, please contact:

Australia
PO Box 92, St Leonards,
NSW 1590 Australia
Ph: +61 2 9438 4377
Fax: +61 2 9439 7310
Email: cis@cis.org.au

www.cis.org.au

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These technologies have quickly worked themselves into the moral fabric of our daily life. They have not only transformed our social landscape but also changed the very moral habits and practices with which we navigate it.

What are the moral skills we need to cultivate to live effectively in the social media world of the twenty-first century public square? In an address given at Consilium in 2012, Peter Kurti proposed the practice of moral wisdom and the recovery of virtue to flourish and live well in the ideagoras of the twenty-first century.

The Rev. Peter Kurti is a Research Fellow in the Religion and the Free Society program at The Centre for Independent Studies.

Related works:

- David Coltart, *The Kingdom of God is Forcefully Advancing and Forceful Men Lay Hold of It* (The Centre for Independent Studies, 14 September 2011)
- Tom Frame, *Do Secular Societies Promote Religious Extremism?* (The Centre for Independent Studies, 7 April 2008)

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