

In Search of Wisdom

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The foundations of moral consensus in society have been eroded almost imperceptibly since the fifteenth century. The stunning success of inductive reasoning and experimental science, combined with philosophical ideas about the nature of what we might know, has led to the privatization of faith and the unfortunate disregard for agreed wisdom amidst the accumulating information we are bombarded with. We have come to believe that science is all we need, and that all “real” knowledge is scientific. The idea that we ought to believe some things to be true has been replaced by our choices of what we want to believe.

As Allan Bloom remarks in *The Closing of the American Mind* (p. 60),

My grandparents found reasons for the existence of their family and the fulfillment of their duties in serious writings, and they interpreted their special sufferings with respect to a great and ennobling past. Their simple faith and practices linked them to great scholars and thinkers who dealt with the same material, not from outside or from an alien perspective, but believing as they did, while simply going deeper and providing guidance. There was a respect for real learning, because it had a felt connection with their lives. This is what a community and a history mean, a common experience inviting high and low into a single body of belief.

I do not believe that my generation, my cousins who have been educated in the American way, all of whom are MDs or PhDs, have any comparable learning. When they talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, parents and children, the human condition, I hear nothing but clichés, superficialities, the material of satire. I am not

saying anything so trite as that life is fuller when people have myths to live by. I mean rather that a life based on the Book is closer to the truth, that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to the real nature of things. Without the great revelations, epics, and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, the mind will remain unfurnished.

Once this mindset was established, it was logically inevitable that we should try to form public policy and morality solely on the basis of scientifically demonstrable facts. The argument that it is impossible to get from physical facts to ethical truths is convincing to many, including this author. Surprisingly, Darwin also thought that the logic of his theory could not lead to predictable morality or wisdom.

Public policy concerns what is best for the flourishing of a society. It is very clear that, in most instances, it is not possible to get from physical facts to moral injunctions. If you have cancer and I have a cure, this does not logically lead to the injunction that I should give the cure to you. If I am a Darwinian and I inherit your estate, the opposite injunction is logical. Only if the general principle “to save life is good” holds true, can you connect the facts to a moral injunction via the general principle. Nevertheless, public policy is formed by assuming, without proof, that we can get from physical data (such as the rate of unwanted pregnancies) to the moral injunction that we ought to legalize abortion and give the morning-after pill to teenagers. This way of arguing is a philosophical sleight of hand and

