

Ideology, Character and Progress

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Abstract

Every society has a dominant ideology, within the context of which each subset of belief and action must be understood. Child-raising practices both express and perpetuate this ideology. Different ideologies predict different outcomes. McClelland (1961) found that a sense of personal responsibility to the Divine was associated with an insistence upon children's self-reliance, which led to an increased number of entrepreneurs, more innovations, and accelerated economic progress. McClelland described his research as an elaboration of Weber's [1904-05] Protestant Ethic thesis. With economic progress there comes a dominant ideology emphasizing human self-sufficiency, and child-raising practices that derive from a sense of personal responsibility to the Divine go out of favor. This is mirrored in educational practices. The work ethic begins to disappear. This value re-orientation is evident in the behavior of American youth.

Keywords: n.Ach, child-raising practices, Protestant Ethic, Evangelical Revival, Darwinism, Self Esteem

Jennings (2006, p. 5) quotes Professor Richard Leftwich: "It takes the FASB two years to issue a ruling and the investment bankers two weeks to figure a way around it." She argues that this skill in evading the law is a result of late 20th century MBA curricula. The road to Enron, Global Crossing, HealthSouth, *et al.* was paved in classrooms where students learned how to create the illusion of unending growth but heard little about ethics.

Jones (2010) says the problem is a matter of philosophy. Misinterpreting Adam Smith, business schools often hand on the doctrine von Mises (1949/1996, p.

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147) summarized when he said modern economic theory was “the spiritual, moral, and intellectual emancipation of mankind inaugurated by the philosophy of Epicureanism.” Epicurus said the universe was a chaos, the greatest good is personal pleasure, and the gods give no thought to human behavior (Robinson, 1932). To the extent something of this kind is believed, self-interest approaches selfishness as a hyperbola approaches its asymptote, and individual choices become a threat to the common good.

But this is superficial. A philosophy gains adherents only to the extent that it speaks to the mind of the time. As Alfred North Whitehead (1925, p. 69) observed,

There will be some fundamental assumption which adherents of all the various systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose . . . Within these assumptions a certain number of types of philosophic systems are possible, and this group of systems constitutes the philosophy of the epoch.

There is, in other words, a dominant ideology, within which every lesser system of belief and action finds its place. Financial techniques are used to deceive regulators and shareholders only because such a usage gives expression to some more general moral conviction. Recent events suggest that this conviction is at odds with the survival of the economic order. This paper examines the social foundations of moral conviction and its role in economic progress.

The Psychological Foundations of Progress

Friedman (2005, pp. 303-04) argues that economic progress can be explained by the inequality $(CQ + PQ) > IQ$: Curiosity Quotient plus Passion Quotient is greater than Intelligence Quotient. Not even the best minds accomplish much without curiosity and passion. Those who want to learn and apply new methods, on the other hand, will make an effective use of whatever intelligence they happen to have. A society with many people of whom this is characteristic may be expected to advance more rapidly than a society in which they are rare.

Curiosity and passion, Friedman (2005) adds, are the results of child-raising and educational practices. He thus goes unknowingly back to an older body of theory and research.

Citing a series of empirical studies that had begun in the late 1940s, McClelland (1961) provided a detailed examination of the line running back from economic progress through personal motivation to the family. Central to his model was a variable called Need for Achievement or *n.Ach*, differences in which were identifiable as early as the age of five.

Winterbottom (1958) found that the mothers of sons high in *n.Ach* expected "self reliant mastery" at an earlier age than the mothers of sons who were lower on this variable. The mothers of the "highs" placed fewer restrictions on their sons than did the mothers of the "lows," but the restrictions had to be observed at an earlier age. They encouraged their sons to master something and blocked attempts to regress to earlier levels. Boys whose independence was a byproduct of neglect were not found to be high in *n.Ach*.

Among the attitudes associated with *n.Ach* is an orientation toward the future (McClelland, 1961): "highs" think constantly about what they are planning to do; they believe in hard work as a means to a better future. *N.Ach* is associated also with a certain kind of risk aversion: in a pure gambling situation, "highs" place the safest bets they can, but if they perceive the outcome as in some measure the result of their own behavior, they interpret the odds as in their favor and see what others may think impossible as in the middle range of difficulty. They persist in the face of repeated failures. Careful in the use of resources, they keep track of how well they are doing. They have little interest in public recognition and view achievement as an end in itself.

Planning, working, risk-taking, persistence, conservation of resources, and an emphasis on results: these are the characteristics of people who start new businesses. McClelland (1961) said *n.Ach* had its effect upon the economy through the generation of entrepreneurs. Furnham (1990) summarized McClelland as arguing that (a) the greater the emphasis on individuality, the more common will be practices that demand self-reliance in the lives of children; (b) the more widespread the emphasis on self-reliance, the greater will be the number of children high in *n.Ach*; (c) the more persons high in *n.Ach*, the more entrepreneurs; (d) the greater the number of entrepreneurs, the more rapid the rate of economic growth.

Arguing that people's attitudes are evident in the kinds of stories they prefer, McClelland (1961) used (among other things) carefully designed literary studies to measure various societies' *n.Ach*. He then correlated the findings with objective measures of economic growth. He found a relationship that was consistent across different levels of development, various types of property ownership and political systems, and in both agricultural and industrial economies. He found *n.Ach* to be positively correlated with subsequent but not previous progress and concluded that it was the cause, not the consequence, of economic growth. Based on a study of the stories in Japanese children's readers, he predicted that Japan would "move from a status as an 'underachiever' in the economic sphere to that of an 'overachiever,' say by 1970" (p.102).

Even before this forecast proved to be correct, Morgan (1966) demonstrated the predictive validity of *n.Ach*. Frey's (1984a, b) research began as an attack on, and concluded as a confirmation of, McClelland's thesis.

Marx, McClelland said, had been too quick in dismissing psychological factors as an historical determinant. Attitudes are the source, not the outgrowth, of changes in the means of production. Different ideologies predict different outcomes.
Religion and the Rise of Capitalism

Ideologies are religious phenomena. Such a statement requires an understanding of religion more comprehensive than Needham's (1969, p. 63) definition of it as "the theology of a transcendent creator-deity." For Durkheim (1915/1965, p. 62), religion was a collection of beliefs and practices referring to representations of ultimate concern and uniting those who subscribe to them into a "single moral community." To the extent a system of shared belief seeks to address fundamental human problems, said Lenski (1961), it is religious. This would include such non-theistic schemes as Confucianism, Buddhism, communism, and even secular humanism. Weber (1922/1965) said every aspect of social behavior is dependent upon a set of assumptions that are in the last analysis religious.

Among other indicators of the degree to which a given society endorses the need for achievement must therefore be included its religious beliefs. Primitive tribes that insisted an individual could come into contact with the Sacred only through the mediation of a priest had folklores suggestive of low *n.Ach*; they were also reluctant to adopt new technologies (McClelland, 1961).

Tribes high in *n.Ach* were likely to emphasize personal responsibility with regard to the Divine and to be progressing rapidly. In northern India, the Jains, Vaishnava Hindus, and Parsees share both a sense of mystical (that is, highly personal, as opposed to ritualistic) reverence and a record of success in business. The disciplines of Zen Buddhism were "simple, direct, self-reliant, and self-denying" (p. 369); this was the religion of the samurai class, from which late 19th century Japan's business leaders were drawn.

Of greater interest for McClelland (1961) was the relationship between religious views and economic progress in the West. The sixteenth century rebellion against Roman Catholicism and the new insistence upon individual responsibility to God, he argued, led to a rise in *n.Ach*. The change in attitudes encouraged Protestant parents to insist upon earlier self-reliance mastery in their children. This was especially true of reading skills, for the words of Scripture were believed to be the best source of information about God. Economic growth was the byproduct of an increasing number of increasingly literate persons with increasingly entrepreneurial attitudes.

McClelland described his work as another approach to Weber's (1904-05/1958) thesis on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Jones (1997) summarized Weber as arguing for the Protestant Ethic as a disciplined lifestyle springing from individualistic religious beliefs and evident in the careful use of time, hard work, saving, innovation, and an emphasis on honesty. Like the child-raising practices at the center of McClelland's model, these attitudes were the result an insistence upon one's personal responsibility to the Divine. The devout businessman was self-interested, but the self upon which this interest was focused was his eternal soul, which would someday be held accountable for every deed.

It might alternatively be said that religious conviction produced an historically unusual definition of self-interested behavior. Few societies have placed a high value on work: Freud (1962) remarked that people do not pursue work as an opportunity for gratification, and Mises (1946/1996, p. 132) says, "To work involves disutility." Mises also pointed to the human tendency to consume rather than save; his idea of "originary interest" (p. 526) derives from this observation.

Far from encouraging innovation, most societies have regarded the traditional way of doing things with an almost superstitious awe, symbolized in the fact that each craft has had its own particular god or patron saint (Weber, 1922/1965). A value system that extends honesty to "unknown others" (McClelland, 1961, p. 195), that is, to those beyond one's locality or clan, is an historical abnormality. All these, Weber (1922/1965, p. 169) said, are "ascetic" disciplines, means to the conviction that one is serving God.

In response to the medieval belief that one could experience a religious "vocation" (from the Latin, *vocare*, "to call") only by abandoning the world to serve God in a monastery, Luther replied that immediate responsibilities were divinely assigned and the experience of a "calling" was best found by faithfully attending to them (Weber, 1904-05/1958). Adam Smith (1759/2002, p. 270) said something similar:

That wisdom which contrived the system of human affections, as well as of every other part of nature, seems to have judged that the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of every individual to that particular portion of it, which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and understanding.

The "invisible hand" (Smith, 1776/1937, p. 423), again, is that by means of which "every individual . . . can, in his local situation, judge much better than any statesman or lawgiver can do for him." He sees that his interests are best served by directing his "industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value." This comes close to repeating Calvin, who taught that brotherly love should be expressed in economic duties; the life acceptable to God was spent in serving others (Weber, 1904-05/1958).

Smith (1776/1937) said that the economy depends upon an intention to provide such service. Consider the behavior of his notoriously self-interested butcher and baker: "Give me that which I want," these men say, "and you shall have this which you want" (p. 14). Their insight with regard to our wants, however, is a byproduct of their desire to serve us. For our part, we must look into our hearts and judge what we have to offer in terms of the butcher's and baker's preferences. We need to think, not about what we want, but about what they will find acceptable "and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages."

The transaction occurs because both parties demonstrate the willingness to as well for others as they would like others to do for them.

Smith lived in a world where the miracles wrought by this attitude were evident on every hand, and leading the way were the groups most affected by the 18th century's Evangelical Revival. Hagen (1962) found that although religious nonconformists, as they were called, accounted for around 6% of the population of England, Scotland, and Wales, they were responsible for over 34% of the innovations that created the Industrial Revolution in Britain. The relationship is statistically significant at $p < .001$. In one of history's great ironies, McClelland (1961, p. 146) observed, preachers who "were almost exclusively concerned with man's relationship with God," proclaimed a doctrine and insisted upon a lifestyle that led to material success.

Capitalism and the Decline of Religion

Prominent among these were the Methodists, upon whose ministry to the lower classes Smith commented in the fifth book of *The Wealth of Nations*. Countless members of England's wretched masses listened to preachers who were interested only in the next world and soon found themselves doing well in this one. The Methodist leader John Wesley saw this happening and admitted to having mixed feelings about it. "I do not see how it is possible in the nature of things for a religious revival to last long," he wrote. "For religion must necessarily produce industry and frugality. And these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will Pride and the love of the world in all its branches" (George, 1953, p. 66).

Cotton Mather saw something similar among New England's Puritans. "*Religion brought forth Prosperity,*" he wrote, and the *daughter destroyed the mother*" (Johnson, 1997, p. 85). Furnham (1990) was saying substantially the same when he observed that the Protestant Ethic led to wealth-producing behaviors and wealth led to a sense of self-sufficiency; this led in turn led to less saving, less work, a greater propensity for self indulgence, and a preference for secular over traditional religious explanations.

Gilder (1980) observed that the receipt of a legacy erodes the powers for maintaining it. This may be in part the result of what Collins (2009, p. 20) described as "hubris born of success." If it is not tempered by a sense of what the 19th century philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher called "a feeling of dependence" (quoted in Otto, 1923, p. 9), achievement may produce an unreasonable confidence. Attribution theory predicts that people will tend to describe accomplishment as the result entirely of their own effort and intelligence (Peters and Waterman, 1982). There is a tendency to forget that social experiences -- including success -- are what Mises (1949/1996, p. 31) called "complex phenomena," that is, the result of multiple causal chains, the links of which are largely hidden from the observer. Prosperity's beneficiaries do not consider its sources in things beyond their ken and learn to deny convictions that lead to productive behavior by insisting on values other than readily identifiable utility.

The basis for this denial is often said to be "science." Educational theorist John Dewey said biology cast doubt on the doctrines of sin, redemption, and immortality (Schlossberg, 1990). Such a statement would have surprised seventeenth century biologists, one of whom told his colleagues, "I bring you proof of God's providence in the anatomy of a louse" (Weber, 1946, p. 142). The first scientists went to their studies in the hope of discovering God's design and plan for the world. This was especially true of Sir Isaac Newton, who believed his discoveries pointed to the work of a Grand Designer: "This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the council and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being" (quoted in Clarke, 2000, p. 52).

Adam Smith agreed. "His efforts," say Bonner and Wiggin (2003, p. 97), "were directed toward discovering the laws by which God's universe was run." Hill (2001) says Smith believed the socio-economic order displays a reasonableness that transcends human intelligence. "The wheels of a watch," Smith (1759/2002, p. 102) wrote, are all admirably adjusted to the end for which it was made. . . . Yet we never ascribe any such desire or intention to them, but to the watchmaker, and we know that they are put into motion by a spring, which intends the effect it produces as little as they do. When by natural principles we are led to advance those ends, which a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us, we are very apt to impute to that reason, as to their efficient cause, the sentiments and actions by which we advance those ends, and to imagine that to be the wisdom of man, which is in reality the wisdom of God.

This is from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a book that ran through six editions in Smith's lifetime, was translated into both French and German, "and was not eclipsed by *The Wealth of Nations* till the rise of political economy amid the battles and smoke of the Victorian age" (Buchan, 2006, p. 52). Viner (1972) said the providentialism of Smith's system was stripped away by the 19th century's secularization of ethics and economics.

This secularization arose from the sense of self-sufficiency that came with widespread prosperity. Darwinism was a symptom of the attitude, not its cause. Whitehead (1925) pointed out that by the time of Darwin "the notion of the mechanical explanation of all the processes of nature" had "hardened into a dogma of science" (p. 59). Like every other ideology, this one rested on assumptions and denied the value of what it could not explain, but it appealed to the self-confidence associated with material prosperity. Talk about ultimate causes is threatening in an age that has found faith in the sufficiency of proximate causes.

Ideology and Education

"Darwin," Nagel (1996, p. 131) said, "enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning, and design as fundamental features of the world." The old idea of an individual soul's eternal destiny was surrendered and along with it the insistence upon personal responsibility to a Greater Power. "There remained only an organism which was born, was nourished, was stimulated, reproduced itself, was destined to fight, was compelled to rationalize its appetites, and then died," wrote Walter Lippmann (1943, p. 379).

Such an ideology must lead to child-raising practices very different from those associated with the Reformation and Evangelical Revival. John Wesley's mother said she sought in raising her children to break the child's unregenerate will and by stern discipline to guide him in the way he ought to go (Cragg, 1960). Writing about child-raising practices two centuries later, William James (1902/1936, p. 357) remarked upon "the exclusively sympathetic and facetious way in which most children are brought up today -- so different from the education of a hundred years ago, especially in evangelical circles" and suggested that it produced a "trashiness of fibre." Twenge (2006,) observed that twenty-first century parents are afraid of rules and discipline.

"They just want to love and guide their children as a trusted friend" (p. 30). Bloom (1987, p. 57) said that having given up religion, American parents "have nothing to give their children in the way of a vision of the world, of high models of action or profound sense of connection with others."

This is evident also in educational practices. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he said that everyone assumed education will be moral and religious (Johnson, 1997). In 1847, Horace Mann told the Massachusetts Board of Education,

That our public schools are not theological seminaries is admitted . . . But our system earnestly inculcates all Christian morals. It founds its morals on the basis of religion; it welcomes the religion of the Bible; it allows it to do what it is allowed to do in no other system, to speak for itself (Johnson, 1997, p. 303).

Until about 1890, the central focus of American education was character training, "character" being defined in terms of the personal traits associated with the need for achievement and Protestant Ethic. Both religious knowledge and traditional academic disciplines were regarded as essential to the process. Under the influence of John Dewey, schools began to be treated as a means to the solution of social problems, and the mastery of course content was deprecated in favor of various "activities" (Ravitch, 2001, p. 58). The ideology of social change took the place of character development.

Wanning (1995, p. 70) says that most societies seek to produce "an obedient child who will fit well into society. The little ego must be molded into that of a well-behaved citizen." It is to this end that the educational process should contribute:

School is thus a precursor of adult work and provides a set of models for it. It may be gratifying, even beneficial, if the child enjoys his homework, but enjoyment is not the purpose of the process. . . . he is required to be productive, to be serious, to meet standards, to turn out the required amount of work at a desired level of quality, to meet certain responsibilities (Neff, 1977, p. 89).

A diminishing emphasis on such socially valuable behaviors is evident among 21st century educational theorists, who insist that "feeling good about yourself is more important than good performance" (Twenge, 2006, p. 56).

Teachers are told they should not correct students' spelling because it is the children's right to be "independent spellers" (p. 61). Stout (2000) says the self-esteem movement is addictive: teachers do not have to make corrections, pupils do not have to accept criticism, and parents hear only good things about their children. High school graduates, though, are ill-prepared either for college or for the world of work.

Twenge (2006) observes that few Americans under the age of 35 have ever been exposed to the notion of duty or the idea that personal desires should not come first. Many have abandoned their religion because of the rules it imposes. In a poll taken in April of 2005, Twenge (2006) reports, 75% of American Catholics said they would follow their own conscience rather than the teachings of the Church. Among students surveyed in 1969, 34% admitted to having cheated; in 1992, the figure was 61%; by 2002, it was 74% for high school students and 80% for students at Texas A&M. The actual level of cheating is less important than the willingness to admit to it. In 2002 it was less likely to have been seen as wrong than it had been in 1969.

Conclusion

"Nothing in the utility-maximizing model," said Nicholson (1992, p. 102) "prevents individuals from deriving satisfaction from philanthropy or generally 'doing good.'" He pointed thus to the truth that different people define self-interest in different ways. Most people's conception of self-interest, it must be added, will derive from the values that spring from their society's working assumptions about the meaning of life. If it is true that people are motivated by self-interest in this broad sense of the term, and if it is admitted that varying societies have experienced varying rates of progress, it seems reasonable to argue that different assumptions about the meaning and purpose of life will lead to varying degrees of social cohesion and economic success. Different ideologies predict different outcomes.

This is the heart of Weber's (1904-05/1958) argument. He never challenged the power of self-interest, but he did insist that not every definition of self-interest would have the same result. The birth of the modern economic order, he said, could not be separated from the definition that sprang from imperatives such as those "enumerated in the Ten Commandments, which provide no reasons for obeying their injunctions and do not affirm fundamental passions but inhibit them" (Bloom, 1987, p. 288).

The ideology that endorsed child-raising practices associated with the inhibition of fundamental passion is a thing of the past. Twenge's (2006) findings suggest that few of today's young people grasp the concept of delayed gratification. The modern attitude is captured in the works of the interviewee who said, "I just try to do whatever will make me happier and think of myself first" (p. 11). It can be argued that this is a self-interest is at odds with that upon on which Smith's (1776/1937) theories depend. What it will lead to only time can tell, but the prospects do not seem bright.

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