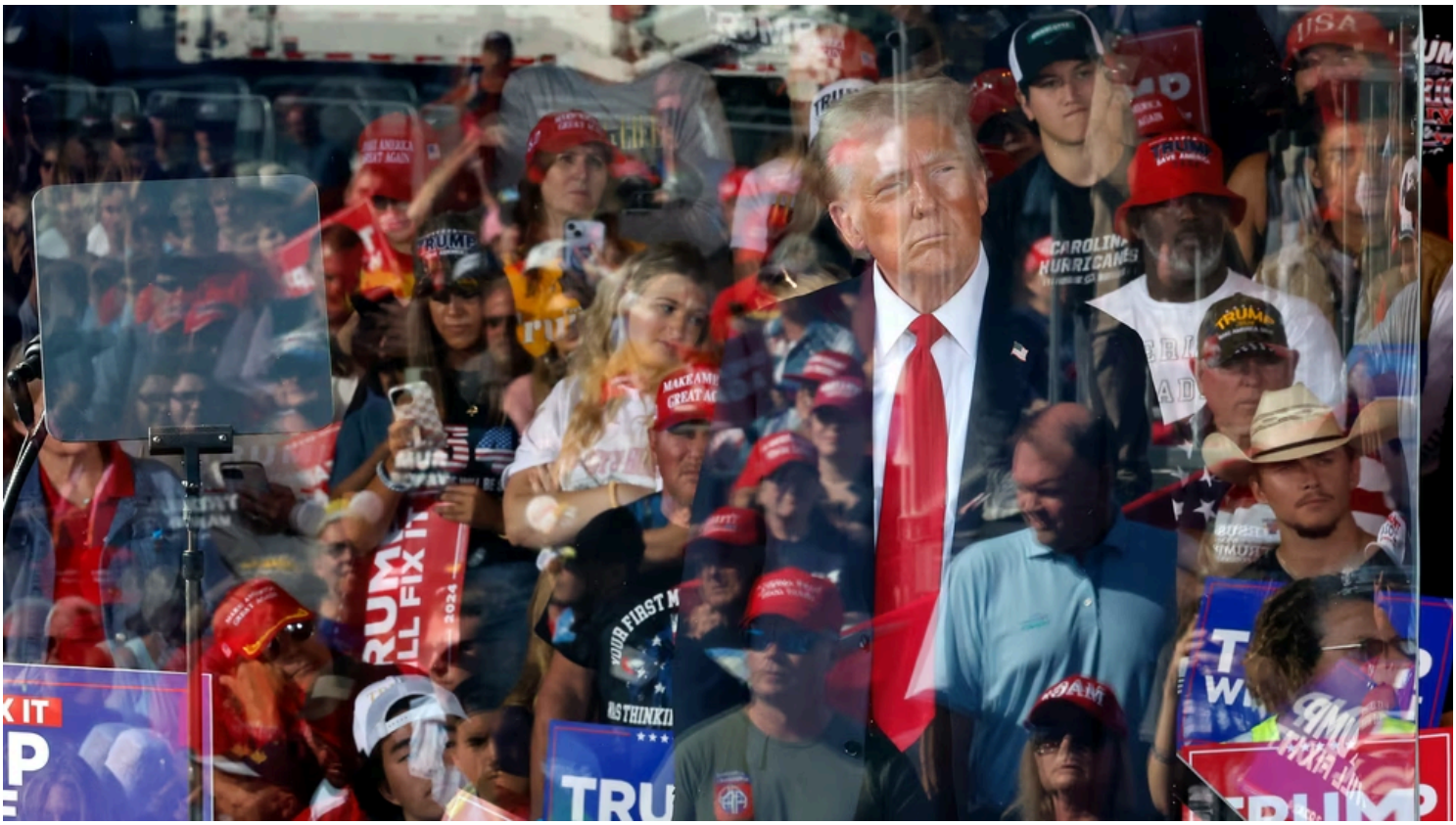
IDEAS

Why Do So Many People Think Trump Is Good?

The work of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre helps illuminate some central questions of our time.

By David Brooks



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There's a question that's been bugging me for nearly a decade. How is it that half of America looks at Donald Trump and doesn't find him morally repellent? He lies, cheats, steals, betrays, and behaves cruelly and corruptly, and more than 70 million Americans find him, at the very least, morally acceptable. Some even see him as heroic, admirable, and wonderful. What has brought us to this state of moral numbness?

I'm going to tell you a story that represents my best explanation for how America has fallen into this depressing condition. It's a story that draws heavily on the thinking of Alasdair MacIntyre, the great moral philosopher, who died in May at age 94. It's a story that tries to explain how Western culture evolved to the point where millions of us—and not just Republicans and Trump supporters—have been left unable to make basic moral judgments.

The story begins a long time ago. Go back to some ancient city—say, Athens in the age of Aristotle. In that city, the question "How do you define the purpose of your life?" would make no sense. Finding your life's purpose was not an individual choice. Rather, people grew up within a dense network of family, tribe, city, and nation. They inherited from these entities a variety of duties, responsibilities, and obligations. They also inherited a social role, serving the people around them as soldiers, farmers, merchants, mothers, teachers.

Each of these social roles came with certain standards of excellence, a code to determine what they ought to do. There was an excellent way of being a warrior, a mother, a friend. In this moral system, a person sought to live up to those standards not only for the honor and money it might bring them, but because they wanted to measure up. A teacher would not let a student bribe his way to a higher grade, because that would betray the intrinsic qualities of excellence inherent in being a teacher.

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By being excellent at my role, I contribute to the city that formed me. By serving the intrinsic standards of my practice, I gradually rise from being the mediocre person I am toward becoming the excellent person I could be. My life is given meaning within this lifelong journey toward excellence and full human flourishing. If I do this journey well, I have a sense of identity, self-respect, and purpose. I know what I was put on this Earth to do, and there is great comfort and fulfillment in that.

If all of this sounds abstract, let me give you a modern example. At his 2005 induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame, the former Chicago Cub Ryne Sandberg described his devotion to the craft of baseball: "I was in awe every time I walked onto the field. That's respect. I was taught you never, ever disrespect your opponents or your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform. You make a great play, act like you've done it before; get a big hit, look for the third-base coach and get ready to run the bases."

Sandberg gestured to the Hall of Fame inductees seated around him. "These guys sitting up here did not pave the way for the rest of us so that players could swing for the fences every time up and forget how to move a runner over to third. It's disrespectful to them, to you, and to the game of baseball we all played growing up." He continued: "I didn't play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I played it right because that's what you're supposed to do—play it right and with respect."

Sandberg's speech exemplifies this older moral code, with its inherited traditions of excellence. It conferred a moral template to evaluate the people around us and a set of moral standards to give shape and meaning to our lives.

Fast-forward from ancient Athens a thousand-plus years to the Middle Ages. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam changed the standards for what constituted human excellence, placing more value on compassion and humility, but people still shared a few of the old assumptions. Individuals didn't choose their own morality—there was an essential moral order to the universe. Neither did they choose their individual life's purpose. That, too, was woven into the good of their community—to serve society in some role, to pass down their way of life, to obey divine law.

Then came the 17th-century wars of religion, and the rivers of blood they produced. Revulsion toward all that contributed to the Enlightenment, with its disenchantment with religion and the valorization of reason. Enlightenment thinkers said: *We can't keep killing one another over whose morality is right. Let's privatize morality. People can come up with their own values, and we will learn to live with that diversity.*

Crudely put, the Enlightenment took away the primacy of the community and replaced it with the primacy of the autonomous individual. It created neutral public systems such as democracy, law, and free speech to give individuals a spacious civil order within which they could figure their own life. Common morality, if it existed at all, was based on reason, not religious dogmatism, and devotion to that common order was voluntary. Utilitarianism was one such attempt at creating this kind of rational moral system—do the thing that will give people pleasure; don't do the thing that will cause others pain.

I think the Enlightenment was a great step forward, producing, among other things, the American system of government. I value the freedom we now have to craft our own lives, and believe that within that freedom, we can still hew to fixed moral principles. Look at the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. if you doubt me.

There's an old joke that you can tell what kind of conservative a person is by what year they want to go back to. I'd say the decline of a shared morality happened over the past 60 years with the rise of hyper-individualism and moral relativism. MacIntyre, by contrast, argued that the loss of moral coherence was baked into the Enlightenment from its start, during the 18th century. The Enlightenment project failed, he argued, because it produced rationalistic systems of morals too thin and abstract to give meaning to actual lives. It destroyed coherent moral ecologies and left autonomous individuals naked and alone. Furthermore, it devalued the very faculties people had long used to find meaning. Reason and science are great at telling you how to do things, but not at answering the fundamental questions: Why are we here? What is the ultimate purpose of my life? What is right and what is wrong?

And then in the 19th and 20th centuries, along came the crew who tried to fill the moral vacuum the Enlightenment created. Nietzsche, for example, said: God is dead.

We have killed him. Reason won't save us. It's up to heroic autonomous individuals to find meaning through some audacious act of will. We will become our own gods! Several decades later, Lenin, Mao, and Hitler came along, telling the people: *You want some meaning in your life? March with me.*

Psychologists have a saying: The hardest thing to cure is the patient's attempt to self-cure. We've tried to cure the moral vacuum MacIntyre saw at the center of the Enlightenment with narcissism, fanaticism, and authoritarianism—and the cure turned out to be worse than the disease.

Today, we live in a world in which many, or even most, people no longer have a sense that there is a permanent moral order to the universe. More than that, many have come to regard the traditions of moral practice that were so central to the ancient worldview as too inhibiting—they get in the way of maximum individual freedom. As MacIntyre put it in his most famous book, *After Virtue*, "Each moral agent now spoke unconstrained by the externalities of divine law, natural teleology, or hierarchical authority." Individuals get to make lots of choices, but they lack the coherent moral criteria required to make these choices well.

After Virtue opens with MacIntyre's most famous thought experiment. Imagine, he writes, that somebody took all of the science books that have ever been written and shredded them. Meanwhile, all of the scientists have been killed and all of the laboratories burned down. All we are left with are some random pages from this science textbook or that. We would still have access to some scientific phrases such as *neutrino* or *mass* or *atomic weight*, but we would have no clue how they all fit together.

Our moral life, he asserts, is kind of like that. We use words like *virtue* and phrases like *the purpose of life*, but they are just random fragments that don't cohere into a system you can bet your life on. People have been cut off from any vision of their ultimate purpose.

How do people make decisions about the right thing to do if they are not embedded in a permanent moral order? They do whatever feels right to them at the moment. MacIntyre called this "emotivism," the idea that "all moral judgments are nothing but

expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling." Emotivism feels natural within capitalist societies, because capitalism is an economic system built around individual consumer preferences.

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One of the problems with living in a society with no shared moral order is that we have no way to settle arguments. We have no objective standard by which to determine that one view is right and another view is wrong. So public arguments just go on indefinitely, at greater levels of indignation and polarization. People use self-righteous words to try to get their way, but instead of engaging in moral argument, what they're really doing is using the language of morality to enforce their own preferences.

If no one can persuade anybody about right and wrong, then there are only two ways to settle our differences: coercion or manipulation. Each of us comes to regard other members of society as simply means to our ends, who can be coerced into believing what we believe. (Welcome to corporate DEI programs.) Alternatively, advertisers, demagogues, and influencers try to manipulate our emotions so we will end up wanting what they want, helping them get what they want. (Welcome to the world of that master manipulator, Donald Trump.)

In the 1980s, the philosopher Allan Bloom wrote a book arguing that in a world without moral standards, people just become bland moral relativists: *You do you. I'll do me. None of it matters very much.* This is what Kierkegaard called an aesthetic life: *I make the choices that feel pleasant at the moment, and I just won't think much about life's ultimate concerns.* As MacIntyre put it, "The choice between the ethical and the aesthetic is not the choice between good and evil, it is the choice whether or not to choose in terms of good and evil."

But the moral relativism of the 1980s and '90s looks like a golden age of peace and tranquility compared with today. Over the past 30 years, people have tried to fill the hole in their soul by seeking to derive a sense of righteousness through their political

identities. And when you do that, politics begins to permeate everything and turns into a holy war in which compromise begins to seem like betrayal.

Worse, people are unschooled in the virtues that are practical tools for leading a good life: honesty, fidelity, compassion, other-centeredness. People are rendered anxious and fragile. As Nietzsche himself observed, those who know why they live can endure anyhow. But if you don't know why you're living, then you fall apart when the setbacks come.

Society tends to disintegrate. Ted Clayton, a political scientist at Central Michigan University, put it well: "MacIntyre argues that today we live in a fragmented society made up of individuals who have no conception of the common good, no way to come together to pursue a common good, no way to persuade one another what the common good might be, and indeed most of us believe that the common good does not and cannot exist."

Along comes Trump, who doesn't even try to speak the language of morality. When he pardons unrepentant sleazeballs, it doesn't seem to even occur to him that he is doing something that weakens our shared moral norms. Trump speaks the languages we moderns can understand. The language of preference: *I want.* The language of power: *I have the leverage.* The languages of self, of gain, of acquisition. Trump doesn't subsume himself in a social role. He doesn't try to live up to the standards of excellence inherent in a social practice. He treats even the presidency itself as a piece of personal property he can use to get what he wants. As the political theorist Yuval Levin has observed, there are a lot of people, and Trump is one of them, who don't seek to be formed by the institutions they enter. They seek instead to use those institutions as a stage to perform on, to display their wonderful selves.

So of course many people don't find Trump morally repellent. He's just an exaggerated version of the kind of person modern society was designed to create. And Democrats, don't feel too self-righteous here. If he was on your team, most of you would like him too. You may deny it, but you're lying to yourself. Few of us escape the moral climate of our age. As MacIntyre himself put it, "The barbarians are not waiting beyond the

frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament."

MacIntyre was a radical—both of the left and the right. He wanted us to return to the kind of coherent, precapitalist moral communities that existed before the Enlightenment project failed, locally at first and then on a larger scale. That's the project that a lot of today's post-liberals have embarked upon, building coherent communities around stronger gods—faith, family, flag.

I confess I find many of the more recent post-liberals—of both left- and right-wing varieties—absurd. People who never matured past the first week of grad school can spin abstract theories about re-creating some sort of totalistic solidarity, but what post-liberalism amounts to in real life is brutal authoritarianism. (A century ago, Marxists talked in similarly lofty terms about building solidarity, but what their ideas led to in the real world was a bunch of gangster states, such as the Soviet Union.)

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We're not walking away from pluralism, nor should we. In fact, pluralism is the answer. The pluralist has the ability to sit within the tension created by incommensurate values. A good pluralist can celebrate the Enlightenment, democratic capitalism, and ethnic and intellectual diversity on the one hand and also a respect for the kind of permanent truths and eternal values that MacIntyre celebrates on the other.

A good pluralist can see his or her life the way that the former Cub Ryne Sandberg saw his—subservient to a social role, willing to occasionally sacrifice immediate self-interest in order to get the runner into scoring position.

Recovering from the moral scourge of Trumpism means restoring the vocabulary that people can use to talk coherently about their moral lives, and distinguish a person with character from a person without it.

We don't need to entirely reject the Enlightenment project, but we probably need to recalibrate the culture so that people are more willing to sacrifice some freedom of autonomy for the sake of the larger community. We need to offer the coming generations an education in morals as rigorous as their technical and career education. As the ancients understood, this involves the formation of the heart and the will as much as the formation of the rational mind.

These are the kinds of humanistic endeavors that MacIntyre devoted himself to, and they are part of the legacy he leaves behind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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David Brooks is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*.

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