Social evils and social good

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The JRF's recent public consultation revealed a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. This *Viewpoint* continues the discussion about modern 'social evils' on the theme of 'a decline in values'. Anthony Grayling argues that it is the responsibility of each of us to confront such difficulties by getting them in proportion; working out if they really are problems; and deciding what we can do about them, individually and collectively.

Key points

- Every generation thinks that the past was a better place and that its own time is one of crisis. Yet contemporary Western liberal democratic societies offer greatly better lives for the majority than fifty or a hundred years ago.

- Lament over the demise of traditional forms of community overlooks the new forms of community, especially among the young, made possible by the Internet. Now there is a wider range of shared experience and knowledge in the nation as a whole.

- Personal autonomy and responsibility, self-determination and independence are far more likely to promote than to degrade concern for others. The illusion of a breakdown in civil intercourse, for which individualism is blamed, is far more the result of a contrast between the worlds we occupy as children and adults.

- Most consumption is a means to the enjoyment that possession offers, and the process itself is therefore often pleasurable.

- Our own time is greatly more moral, equitable, just and caring than the Victorian age.

- There can be and are good and happy families with only one parent in them, and achieving this is the desideratum that society should work towards without preconceptions about traditional models and numbers.

- We must find ways of giving young people responsibility, recognition, status, self-respect, and a chance to acquire and internalise self-discipline – for self-discipline is a liberating power and transforms life for the better.

- To decriminalise drugs and their use, and to place them into the same framework as alcohol, would reduce the allure of drugs, free police time, and wipe out the criminal drug industry at a stroke.

- That inequalities persist is a cost of the other benefits that accrue from the arrangements of contemporary Western liberal democracies. As long as continual efforts at rebalancing are maintained, it is a cost worth paying.

- Crime and violence are endemic in human societies but people (aided by the media) tend to over-inflate its seriousness.

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Introduction

The results of the consultation on social evils should not come as a surprise, because they confirm what is generally understood to be public perception of contemporary social problems and ills – a public perception well-represented in the media debate, and reciprocally fostered and reinforced by the more conservative sections of that media. The JRF asked those it consulted to focus on what they perceived as the social evils of our time, and a familiar litany resulted; one need is to place it in context and ask whether, in absolute rather than just relative terms, the social evils identified are all that they seem.

For a student of ethics and history, the consultation's results confirm the observation that every generation thinks that the past was a better place and that its own time is one of crisis. Yet by almost any standard one cares to mention, contemporary Western liberal democratic societies offer greatly better lives for the great majority of people than was the case fifty or a hundred years ago. In late Victorian London – whose streets swarmed with child prostitutes and where it was too dangerous to walk at night, where abject poverty and suffering were a norm and social divisions crushed opportunity and self-respect for many – life was much less pleasant, safe, civilised and well-provided than it is now, for all but the relatively few. I would not myself wish to be a woman in any other period of history, or any other part of today's world, than in today's Western democracies. This fact alone – concerning as it does half of humanity – should be evidence that the great majority of us in today's United Kingdom arguably live in some of the best times and places in history, from the point of view of individual human experience and opportunity.

Most of those who expressed pessimistic views in the consultation would, if asked to occupy an analogous situation in a past period of history, and were well-informed about what that would actually mean, would almost certainly not wish to go back in time. Indeed, one wonders whether, if their knowledge of such comparisons were greater, their view of present circumstances would have been so unreflectively bleak.

All the above does not mean there are no problems in contemporary society – far from it – but it does mean that they need to be put into perspective. This is all the more important because those who voice concerns about problems in society tend to be of a conservative inclination in matters of morality and mores, and it is the more emphatic, concerned or even anxious among them who are likely to volunteer opinions, for example on a website consultation.

The risk, therefore, is that the social debate is likely to have a bias towards the opinions of those who feel exercised by their perceptions of what is wrong in society, and it is a matter of the first importance that such perceptions should be put into context and examined. If public policy is determined by the attitudes of the more conservative and fretful members of society, who see bogeys under the bed when none such are there, the resulting distortions will be harmful. Arguably, this is indeed the case in our society, and it needs redress. One thing the JRF consultation might show, therefore, is how concerns about social evils are expressed by a self-selected concerned minority, inflated by the media offering sensation in order to increase sales or viewers, and acted upon by governments wishing to placate manufactured 'public opinion'. The skewed results, not infrequently, make matters worse rather than better.

In what follows, therefore, I question some of the attitudes and views expressed in the consultation. I do this by taking each of the salient points registered in the report on the consultation, and commenting on it.

The four main 'social evils'

The four main evils identified by the consultation were: decline of community; individualism; consumerism and greed; and a decline of values. I challenge each as follows.

A decline of community
It is true that communities of a more traditional kind, such as existed in villages or working-class suburbs two generations ago, are much less common because of increased mobility and population diversity. That is the neutral fact, which some see as regrettable and others as a marker of social, economic and demographic change, bringing considerable advantages with it.

Many of the functions traditionally performed by neighbourliness, such as help in times of trouble, mutual support, sharing of information, and the like, have been taken over by public institutions such as schools, the health service, the media, the police, and other civil society organisations. All of these arose because traditional community life was insufficiently regular, reliable, organised and resourced to be a sure basis of support. That society has shouldered these responsibilities in place of the uncertain abilities and inclinations of one's local neighbours is assuredly a gain.

Lament over the demise of traditional forms of community overlook the new forms of community, especially among the young, made possible by the internet. The internet gives wider reach, even international reach, to acquaintanceship and friendship; they are a massive extension of pen-friendship, with great opportunities for sharing experience and learning about others, which can only be a good thing. True, the internet allows for various kinds of abuses too, but that is a risk even of more traditional community relations. Moreover, it protects wholly against certain sorts of abuses which were once too common, and too hidden, in traditional communities.

Whereas community tended once to be highly local and therefore exclusive of other communities (even the village down the road), public media have created a far wider range of shared experience and knowledge in the nation as a whole. 'Community' has become a larger concept as a result, and with the institutionalisation of community activity through pooled resources (such as the health service) a much better framework for individual life is assured.

Individualism
It is true that individualism can lead to selfishness and insularity, but both these characteristics were present in the past even under the negative aspects of a too-intrusive, too-controlling, too-present community – the narrow-minded, lace-curtain-twitching village community of continual observation and nosiness, which could be a blight on lives. Greater scope for individual expression and exploration of life possibilities is a positive thing; autonomy in the moral and social spheres is as much an opportunity as a demand for responsible self-determination and self-reliance. The scope afforded by individualism is not inconsistent with community and cooperation, which becomes voluntary and selective rather than being imposed, as is so often the case in social settings where individual liberty is limited or even discouraged.

Historically, church and state sought to impose uniformities of belief and behaviour on the population, and punished any divergences, sometimes severely: even with death for heresy. A key to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was the concept of individual autonomy, the responsibility to think for oneself, to take responsibility for one's choices and values, and to be free to pursue goals that suit one's gifts and interests – subject always to the principle of not harming others or interfering with their own freedom. Individual liberty promotes the widest variety of experiments in living good and flourishing lives.

'Individualism' is thus the opposite of any view enjoining conformity and uniformity, and the limitations required to ensure them. It is not the opposite of appropriate altruism and concern for others. Its pejorative use to denote selfishness and lack of concern for others is a misuse; the right terms for these latter are those words themselves: 'selfishness' and 'lack of concern for others'. In all ages and all moral systems these are rightly regarded as lamentable characteristics.

Today – as throughout history, as the evidence of literature abundantly shows – there is a perception that selfishness and lack of concern for others is increasing. There is a straightforward explanation for this universally iterated view: as children in the home environment, in the great majority of homes, we experience courtesies of social intercourse in relation to our parents' friends, aunts and uncles, grandparents and others, which exist far less in the bustle of the public arena that we encounter in adulthood. This gives the illusion of a breakdown in civil intercourse, for which individualism is blamed; it is in fact far more the function of a contrast between the worlds we occupy as children and adults.

But personal autonomy and responsibility, self-determination and independence are in fact are far more likely to promote than to degrade concern for others, because any reflective individual recognises that individuals benefit from cooperation and mutuality, for humans are social animals and the fullest growth of individual potential lies in a social setting. To stress the point: 'cooperation and mutuality' are not 'conformity and uniformity'; individualism is the rejection of the latter, not the former.

Consumerism and greed

The enjoyment of goods and services, especially quality goods and services, was once the province of the rich and privileged alone. One thinks of Venice in history as the trading post for luxury goods – silks, spices, glassware, art and the like – which only relatively few could afford. Sumptuary laws in any case prevented those who were becoming wealthy from being able to share the nobility's level of pleasure in ownership. Now that Western societies are richer and freer, such enjoyment is a far more widespread phenomenon; the opportunities to beautify one's home, dress well, enjoy travel and leisure and take pleasure in rewarding one's labours with shopping and choosing, buying and owning constitute a legitimate activity.

The idea that people are manipulated into consumerism by advertisers is at best a very partial truth; witness the canniness of shoppers, their eye for a bargain, their choosiness and the way that economic downturns and mortgage repayment increases immediately affect retail sales on the high street. This is proof that people are generally autonomous in decisions about what they buy, and by the same token therefore their consumption, when they have the cash for it, is equally considered.

Moreover, there is the thesis advanced by James B. Twitchell in his book *Lead us Into Temptation,* that consumption is an expression of creativity and individuality; functionally, the activity of buying a designer-label item is equivalent to the body decoration of people in traditional cultures, in making a statement about oneself to others, in positioning oneself socially and in constituting one's sense of self.

Everything is subject at the margins to abuse and addiction, and there are people for whom consumption (of food, alcohol, drugs or goods) is an end in itself. But most consumption is instrumental, that is, is a means to enjoyment and the satisfactions that possession offers, and it is an added value that the process itself is therefore often pleasurable – as the humorous reference to 'retail therapy' (cheering oneself up by shopping) implies. It is an austere view indeed that says we should not reward ourselves in this way with the money we earn by our own labours, on the grounds that it is shallow, empty and misguided. Such a view misses the point that the good and well-lived life must be satisfying for the one living it too, as well as fruitful in good towards others.

A decline of values: lack of a sense of right and wrong

As an example of 'the grass was greener when we were young', this is a classic. The vast majority of people live responsible lives, and there is wide agreement about what is right and wrong in society. All the focus of public discussion in the media tends to be about the areas where, as is always the case in any society in any period of its history, there is negotiation about changing attitudes. Think, for example, of the legalisation of homosexual sex between consenting adults, and the concomitant greater social acceptance of gay people, wrought by the debate in the 1950s and 1960s in the UK. Some fiercely opposed (some still oppose) acceptance of homosexuality, and believed that the country was in steep moral decline because it was admitting the sin of Sodom; others thought that we were achieving a great moral advance by being more understanding, inclusive, generous and humane in our attitudes, and more scientific in our grasp of the range of human normality and diversity – and by acting on these better attitudes in a rational manner.

People look back to Victorian times as more moral and restrained. Well, middle-class Victorians were certainly more moralistic, but the reason is that many people were far less morally restrained in practice. The streets of London, as previously mentioned, swarmed with prostitutes, muggers and pickpockets. The profoundly inequitable society saw tens of thousands struggle and sometimes starve in abject poverty, not infrequently being forced into crime to survive, while the better-off were largely indifferent to their plight – itself a moral outrage of a kind that throws our own age into the shade by comparison.

It is emphatically the case, therefore, that our own time is greatly more moral, equitable, just and caring than the Victorian age. We have a welfare net for those in difficulty; we have a national health service open to all and free at the point of need; we try to provide everyone with an education to give them a platform for making something of themselves in life; and our legal system is independent and technically everyone is equal before it.

Of course, disparities in wealth continue to play their role in making society unequal, in that those with money can get medical and legal services of a quality and with a degree of convenience barred to those without the same level of wealth. Disparities in wealth are not inequitable, but they are a cost of having the kind of society we have, rather than Victorian arrangements where the haphazard and uneven application of charity or community was the only protection people had against the abyss – and where most of those who teetered on its brink eventually fell into it, for all the moralising and high-mindedness of Victorian sentiment.

The six concrete social evils

Disagreeing with those surveyed on the question of the four most salient social evils does not, however, entail disagreement with all of the other six social evils identified; though here there must be qualification and care too.

The decline of the family
There have always been dysfunctional families, especially amongst those communities suffering from poverty and low educational levels and aspirations on the part of the parents. Population growth has increased this sector in absolute terms, although one would confidently predict that in proportional terms the number of dysfunctional families in contemporary society is far less than it was a century ago; and one would further surmise that there is a difference between the proportions in the native British community and some immigrant communities with different traditions of family life (who might have lower rates of cohabitation between parents of children, as a norm of expectations about respective responsibilities of parents).

Fewer people marry, more people divorce, and one-parent families are commonplace. One-parent families were common also during the two world wars because of soldiering duties and military fatalities, but there is no evidence to suggest that this fact was by itself socially destructive. Rather, a certainty of negative consequences of a family having only a one parent in it, such as poverty and lack of a (usually male) role model, can cause problems for children. Adequate resources and the presence of helpful others in a family's circle of acquaintance go a long way to address these problems, as does the quality of the parenting of the single parent. There is no inevitability that one-parent families will produce dysfunctional children, and it is unhelpful to people valiantly working single-handedly – because of widowhood or divorce – to provide a caring and nurturing home for children, to be told that their children are doomed to problems because of mere arithmetic. As the example of the wars suggest, it is not the arithmetic of one-parent families that is the problem by itself; it is what it can mean if the result is poverty and lack of support. In the past, social stigma was attached to divorce or unmarried motherhood, and that compounded the difficulty; there is now no such stigma. But there is still relative poverty, and that is the main source of difficulties.

None of this implies that it is not better for children to have as many loving and caring adults in their lives as possible, which I express in these terms to allow that gay couples can be as good parents as heterosexual couples, and that children are best off with a variety of adults to be loved by, including grandparents and uncles and aunts, all of whom can make a contribution to the confidence and good socialisation of children. This is what should best be meant by 'family'. But there also can be and are good and happy families with only one parent in them, and achieving this is the desideratum that society should work towards without preconceptions about traditional models and numbers.

The behaviour and treatment of young people
At the time of writing (May 2008), the Youth Justice Board had just announced a 'further drop' in crimes committed by youths, and issued the information that the great majority of youth crime consists of theft (such as shoplifting) and 'minor assaults'. No crime is acceptable, but the perception that a significant sector of the youth population is engaged in crime is misleading, even more so when the belief is that youths often engage in serious crime. This can confidently be said even in the light of knife crime, which mainly involves youths and young adults. As a proportion of crimes committed by these age groups, knife crimes are, fortunately, a tiny fraction of one percent – though even that is too much.

Again, therefore, media focus on youth crime and knife crime greatly inflates the problem; which is not to say that there is no problem, but that its scale and nature require a proper perspective.

A cause for concern about some young people is the fact that discourtesy, inconsiderate behaviour and associated license (swearing, spitting, rowdiness) goes unchecked, or when challenged by adults is sometimes met with violence. A major part of the reason is indeed likely to be breakdown of discipline in some homes, or more likely its uneven and ill-considered over-application. There are questions also about the assertion of disciplines in schools, given that sanctions employed in the past are no longer legal or acceptable; and likewise there are questions about the withdrawal of certain kinds of policing that gave bobbies on the beat an extension of the parental role in checking misbehaviour. The presence of rowdiness in some areas of towns and cities, notably at certain times of the week, is probably far greater in appearance and volume than actual numbers; most young people in most of the country are not involved.

A contributory but not necessitating factor is something that is in itself either neutral or good: the greater freedom, mobility, spending power and communication capacity (with mobile telephones and internet resources) of young people. Trying to solve the problem of anti-social behaviour by limiting these things would be counter-productive. The use of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) has likewise been counterproductive: for a certain sort of young male these are regarded as badges of honour; for those with civil liberties concerns, they seem an inappropriate response to non-criminal or sub-criminal behaviour.

In my view, the problem results partly from the factors mentioned above, and partly from the lengthened time that young people are kept in the relatively disempowered status of minors, which – given the paradoxical mobility and spending power considerations – creates ambiguities and tensions. In times past, the period between the onset of adolescence and full adult status often coincided with apprenticeship or naval or military service for males, and apprenticeship or early marriage for females. Responsibility and status are powerful incentives to young people to behave more responsibly, but in our present arrangement of society they have capacity (mobility, money) without status and responsibility (they are still technically schoolchildren). This is an unhelpful combination for some, especially those for whom school is irksome and unsatisfying, perhaps because of learning problems or lack of encouragement at home, and the concomitant growth of a culture of anti-education, anti-school sentiment among some youths.

This is not the place for setting out a full menu of options for dealing with the problem, but it must include finding ways of giving young people responsibility, recognition, status, self-respect, and a chance to acquire and internalise self-discipline – the greatest boon anyone can have, for self-discipline is the liberating power *par excellence* and transforms life for the better in almost every case. This implies changes of structure and practice in education from puberty onwards, ideally mixing it with paid work and involving older youths in educating younger youths, inculcating responsibility towards others. Responsibility advances maturity and personal growth because it is educative, provides insights and satisfies the need for a means to self-respect and self-worth. Hooligan behaviour is a means to the same ends in the eyes of peers, simply because better ways of achieving them are absent. The structure contemporary society imposes on adolescence needs to be overhauled to account for this central fact.

Drugs and alcohol
Conjoining the above two words illustrates a problem that society has created for itself: criminalising certain drugs and their use, yet accepting and tolerating alcohol – a drug which is every bit as harmful and dangerous as most of the proscribed drugs – and tolerating the commitment to pay for the consequences of alcohol use and abuse through our tax-funded health and criminal justice systems. Why is the way one dangerous drug is handled (alcohol) different from the way other such drugs are handled (cocaine, heroin, marijuana)?

The failed experiment of Prohibition in the United States in the 1920s teaches two valuable lessons which a mature and sensible society ought to take on board. The first is that outlawing alcohol and its consumption is not socially practicable, and efforts to do so inevitably create a huge criminal industry which brings far more problems than are offered by the percentage of people who are affected badly or even destroyed by alcohol abuse. The use and the abuse of alcohol are separable questions. Age limits, licensing restrictions, penalties for driving or using machinery while intoxicated (the word, remember, means 'poisoned') by alcohol, all work to keep alcohol use and abuse within reasonably acceptable bounds, the over-spill being regarded as acceptable.

Replace the word 'alcohol' with the words 'cocaine', 'heroin', 'marijuana' in the above passage, and with the single exception of a need for qualification in the second sentence (thus: 'outlawing cocaine/heroin/marijuana and their consumption is not practicable in regard to those groups in society who wish to consume them') the same considerations apply across the board. Society has burdened itself with massive policing costs, and it has outlawed and marginalised sections of the community, in its effort to apply temperance principles to drugs since the first three decades of the twentieth century; it has thereby created a drug crime industry with gang-warfare and murder among the consequences.

To decriminalise drugs and their use, and to place them into the same framework as alcohol, would not result in a mass epidemic of drug-taking any more than the legality of alcohol results in permanent population-wide drunkenness. It would reduce the allure of drugs, free police time, wipe out the criminal drug industry at a stroke – and incidentally provide economic advantages to the agricultural industries of Afghanistan and Colombia.

Drugs (including alcohol) are harmful, especially when abused. Responding by criminalising them makes a not very good situation vastly worse. The perceived problem about drugs is not their existence and effects – this is a constant whether they are illegal or otherwise – but has a great deal to do with our mishandling of their presence in society.

Poverty and inequality
Putting these two words together muddles the question from the outset. Inequality is a norm in societies where, quite justly, greater effort and talent, higher educational attainment and other goods are more valued than laziness, lack of ambition, or having less to offer. Inequality is not the same thing as inequity (injustice), which is of course unacceptable. If inequalities exist because some are deliberately excluded from opportunity, education or health care, then those inequalities are unjust. And indeed, some of the inequalities in society are inequitable and are caused by inequities. But overall our society endeavours to level the playing field somewhat in the starting stakes, with nationally-provided education and healthcare and a fair legal system. 'Somewhat' is the right word here because private education and health, and the unequal distribution of wealth at the starting point, skew the system unequally and therefore sometimes inequitably. This itself is the result of the equitable inequality that begins with differences in effort and talent, but then feeds through the system and causes imbalance later, typically with the advantages conferred on the children of successful people; so it is right that there should be constant efforts to redistribute in favour of the less advantaged – again, through education, health and the legal framework.

That inequalities persist is a cost of the other benefits that accrue from the arrangements of contemporary Western liberal democracies, and so long as continual efforts at rebalancing are maintained, it is a cost worth paying.

Poverty is an entirely different matter. Poverty in any society is corrosive and disabling for those who suffer it. A society might be unequal, but its bottom layers might still have a decent sufficiency of the necessities of life, plus opportunities to enjoy other goods that ameliorate life and add to the value of lived experience. The ideal is a society without poverty, even if there are inequalities of wealth.

Poverty is either relative or absolute. Having to subsist on a dollar a day or less, and having to walk for miles to get clean water, is the experience of absolute poverty in third world countries. People suffering relative poverty in today's Britain might have a television set, a car and somewhere to live and yet be poor relative to the average.

It can be argued that relative poverty is worse than the absolute poverty experienced in developing countries, because at the same time as fostering resentment, it prevents people from participation in society on a fair basis with fellow citizens – thus resulting in exclusion. While some enjoy very high standards of living and others suffer deprivation and immiseration, a society cannot be regarded as decent. The effort to redress this imbalance through welfare and employment schemes is right, though few societies have yet found the magic mix of incentives and requirements to help people help themselves out of poverty.

No society in which the poverty of some is necessary for the wealth and well-being of others is acceptable. This is not, and need not be, the case in liberal Western democracies.

Immigration, unfairness and intolerance
Immigration is far too large a question to be dealt with here, except to say that the social evils consultation correctly emphasises the point that social problems are prompted from both directions: from the direction of those who feel hostile or intolerant towards immigrants and fearful of the divisiveness created by substantial immigration; and from the direction of those who suffer from discrimination engendered by the foregoing attitudes, and occasionally exacerbate the difficulty by their reaction (which, when it occurs, typically does so among second and subsequent generations following immigration).

It has to be acknowledged that those who object to immigration too often do so on grounds that are uncomfortably close to racism and xenophobia. At the same time, the impact of immigration can indeed be negative, which is where criticism of government handling of the question enters. Muslim communities in Britain have assimilated less well and are perceived to be more divisive than (for the prime examples of uncomplicated fitting-in despite retaining distinctive cultural elements) the Jewish and Chinese communities. This is the chief reason why 'multiculturalism' is now being perceived as a failure, with a demand for different and better solutions to the genuine problems that immigration poses.

Crime and violence

Crime and violence are endemic in human societies and always have been. They are a perennial problem caused by relatively few but placing a great strain on society as a whole in costs of policing, criminal justice, penal institutions, and loss and harm to citizens. Continuing with efforts to prevent crime and to minimise its impact when it happens is the rent we pay for the benefits we enjoy in the kind of society we have; namely, a society in which there is private property and differentials in income and wealth and where ordinary management of life is a complex matter. Because of these facts there will always be the five per cent of people who will not or cannot live legitimately, and who will therefore prey on the majority to get what they want by the short-cut of crime. This is not new, and people (aided by the media) tend to over-inflate its seriousness. It is serious enough without being made disproportionate by the media.

Who or what is to blame?

Most respondents in the social evils consultation blamed the government, media, religion and big business for today's social evils. They blamed the first for being out of touch and ineffective, the second for fuelling anxieties, the third as a cause of conflict and division, and the fourth as promoting consumerism and inequalities. There is a measure of truth in all these judgments, especially the second and third. The first illustrates the fact that people have far too high an expectation of government, whose capacity to address some of society's problems (those caused by immigration, for example) is not matched by its capacity to deal with others (the alleged problems of individualism and consumerism). If it sought to address these last two by legislation it would make itself a tyranny, and the objections would be vastly greater than complaints that it does not do enough.

All societies have problems at all phases of their history, and the task is to understand and cope with them, accepting that the complexity, diversity, and benefits of social living carry a cost which we do our best to minimise and where possible change, as part of our responsibility as joint curators of society. How many respondents nominated themselves as the sources of some of the problems – "*my* racist feelings … *my* greed … *my* selfishness"? One would guess very few. Yet is the responsibility of each member of society to play a part in confronting difficulties, and the first step is getting them in proportion, working out whether they really are difficulties and, if so, what each of us individually, and all of us collectively, can do about them. The social evils project is a step towards this very goal.

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