

The Divided States of America, as Simon Schama recently observed, are official since the 3rd of November. Many are still disconcerted by the electoral result. But increasingly, the main reason for the defeat of those who believed they could see this government out is being attributed to the cooptation by its electors of the notion of "moral value". According to this argument, Kerry talked policy, hard fact, pragmatism and realism - he talked to the head. Bush, perhaps in the belief that the heart is higher, nobler than the head, talked "morality" and to the heart, convincing many of his voters that they have "morality" on their side.

To have a moral conscience, though, is to have the ability to accommodate one's heartfelt beliefs to the head - to other beliefs, to thoughts, questions and evidence. And so, if it is indeed true that Bush won thanks to voters who supported him for his moral values, then it is worth trying to understand how in the world such a contradiction could have happened.

The cooptation of the "moral" dimension by a political party whose moral conscience seems rather low was not in fact explicit - and was hence all the more insidious. A realization within the mainstream liberal media that the slippage of language was signalling danger could have helped. But the priority, on news reports, was not to examine or take to task the Republicans' volatile use of language. Instead, GOP formulations like "moral values" (or "culture of life", for that matter) were being adopted wholesale to designate what such formulations had never designated before. It was even taken for granted that everyone knew the GOP use and that it was now the acceptable, default mode. No one asked what these words meant otherwise, or examined whether they were appropriate to the use to which they were being put.

No one, that is to say, ventured to go philosophical in public.

Perhaps that is just not done. After all, Socrates was killed for trying. It has never been particularly fashionable to engage in the hard task of pursuing elusive definitions or to focus on grammatical precision. The notion that reason is a good is still not quite a given even on those very East-coast Liberal Arts campuses, where, on the day after the election, students were as despondent and depressed as their professors.

But it was too late on that day to ask Bush and his acolytes and voters:
 What is a moral value (henceforth MV)?
 What is a value?
 and perhaps:
 What is it to act morally?

These old questions are occasionally assigned to freshmen students - rarely thereafter and, if not in books of philosophical divulgation, hardly ever beyond seminar rooms. But in the meantime it might be useful to think about them to some extent, and to ask a few questions to the twice-elected President.

So, then: President Bush, define MV.
 Bush: It is the "right to life" - he might begin (another short-cut of dangerous use, but let us leave that to rest this time).
 - No, that is a belief. Try again.
 B.: ...
 - So?
 B.: OK. It is a value that is moral.
 - What is a value then?

B. : A belief.

- So to act according to an MV is to act according to a moral belief; or do you mean a belief about what is moral?

B. : ...

- How can a belief be moral?

B. : Certain values are sacrosanct.

- What do you mean by sacrosanct? That which is moral?

B. : Of course!

- But again, then, how do you define that which is moral, or sacrosanct?

B. : Moral values.

- We're back at square one. Values are beliefs, we've agreed -

B. : Our beliefs are founded on the word of God...

- But who says they are moral?

B. : God.

- Do you personally know that God would condemn you for aborting a child? What about condemning you for letting the seed of a rapist come to fruition?

B. : Rapists should be duly punished...

- But why should the raped woman pay the price of the crime?

B. : She would be paying if her foetus were assassinated.

- Why does a belief have to be an imperative?

B. : We are here to protect the values of all Americans...

- What does that have to do with defining moral values?

B. : We don't need to define them, we have them...

- I thought moral deliberation was about weighing circumstance and dealing with conflicts between irreconcilable interests, needs, duties and rights and so on. Incidentally, I thought politics was also about that.

B. : ... and it is our duty to guide the nation...

But there is no point here in listing the GOP's heartfelt convictions, which it of course identifies and disguises as MVs. We could begin to clarify the field, however, if we instead identify what Bush confusedly presupposes MVs to be as beliefs about what it is obligatory for a person to do in order to be sanctified as good by authorities political, religious or other. An MV here is an imperative, but its legitimacy as "moral" depends on one's accepting the moral authority of its provenance. You might say that "thou shalt not kill" is an MV because of Moses's authority, which in turn derives from God. But the step from dogmatic darkness to enlightened reasonableness is quite subtle: for one can just as well confer on this commandment a metaphorically divine authority in the strict sense that it is irreducible. The authority of the provenance can in fact be found by reflection, as Kant would have had it. For our purposes, it need not actually be God-given. In anthropological terms, even Bush's MV could be defined as a code of action, whose authority in turn is based on certain values, that is, on certain beliefs about what it is right or wrong to do - in absolute terms and as modulated according to circumstance.

Crucially, however, MVs are devoid of a priori content. For the GOP to claim that it alone cares about them - without then bothering to define what they are - is for it to presume that its beliefs about what it is right and wrong to do in any circumstance are, regardless of circumstance, absolute and absolutely right. It is, in fact, to claim that no one beyond that group is conceptually able to distinguish right from wrong, and to forget that thinking about right and wrong is far more complex than claiming that one form of behaviour is moral, while another is not.

It isn't always difficult to distinguish right from wrong, though. For it is hard to claim that poverty is a good; that greed is a good; that the destruction of nature - that which pious Christians have always identified as God-made - is a good; that the encouragement to bear destructive weapons is a good; that the encroachment on personal freedoms, those given at the very foundation of this country on ethical, thought-out grounds, is a good.

Of course no government is ever good. But for a governing power to be outright bad, it must be mendacious, misleading, at least two-faced, motivated by greed and self-interest, able to use empathy merely for the sake of selfishness, in favour of policies that bring more harm than benefit. In general, though, the business of politics is neither good nor bad. It supposes, for the individual to survive within it - and aside from the vision, idealism, self-sacrifice that at best must accompany the decision to step into it - a number of double-edged qualities: the refined cultivation of strategic reason, altruism mitigated by self-interest and selfishness disguised as altruism, aggressivity and empathy, rhetorical talent and the ability to manipulate facts and passions; and enough ambition to counteract the melancholic self-doubt any thoughtful person can be assailed by, from time to time. Self-doubt, in fact, constitutes at least one aspect of moral conscience - as the capacity to wonder about the value of one's actions, about their motivations, their consequences, and about the relation between motivation and consequence.

It is a heavy irony, then, that the GOP was so easily able to adopt the MV expression - on the back of which it can now continue conducting patently bad policies. Again, every government is capable of implementing bad policies. But the ease with which MV, as an expression rather than as a concept, was brought into the business of platform-building, signals how poor our attention to language has become.

For the abuse of language is a serious matter. Not so long ago, dissidents from the countries beyond the Iron Curtain emerged in the West with descriptions of how the Communist regime was able to coopt language, to transform meaning to such an extent that it in fact stole words away from individuals. A word's meaning has to be precise, agreed upon and respected for an individual then to be able to use it freely, to play with it creatively, effectively. The words that free-thinking people and writers still possessed seemed dangerous to the apparatchiks - and so they were. The late Czeslaw Milosz warned in his Nobel lecture that "The exile of a poet is today a simple function of a relatively recent discovery; that whoever wields power is also able to control language, and not only with the prohibition of censorship, but also by changing the meaning of words". Once a word's meaning is no longer respected and becomes an item of Newspeak, it can become a toy in the wrong hands, abused and shorn of its power - just as an over-reproduced, abused painting or melody can lose its power, its rationale, its meaningfulness. A word mistreated in this way is in fact lost to language, and thus to individual use - until conceptual analysis restores it to its initial function. The notion of MV (as that of "culture of life" and so on) has undergone just such a mistreatment.

The American electorate, regardless of its political colour, has not yet thought enough about the tragedies that can arise out of the failure to examine what words mean. It is as easy for members of a society to repeat formulae, implicitly acknowledging a shared meaning whose details no one will question, as it is for each of us, in our individual lives, to let half-acknowledged stories about our selves blind us to our true needs, desires, emotions. At all levels, we simply forget to ask the right questions, and more seriously, we forget how important it is to be able to ask them. Self-deception is an old problem, but high-speed communication multiplies its dimensions. If one accepts the misuse of an expression without stopping and examining its validity in context, the

expression will spread and turn into a mediatic buzz-word, an empty "idea" masking the absence of a debate about content and policy. This is how we all have participated in the distortion of reality that is implied by the novel use of the expression - by giving into the new, but uncalled-for minting of meaning. This is how we are accomplices to those who dropped the coin, as it were.

In the case of this election, it might be far-fetched to claim that linguistic looseness is responsible for the defeat of moral rectitude - again, politics are politics and one cannot hope that any political party embody goodness. But it is certainly, and substantially, an aspect of the moral itch that has seized the world.

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