

The fight to reclaim decency

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I noted these paragraphs in the [latest Substack](#) by the author who writes as Aurelien, whose identity I know but will not share. H has considerable foreign affairs experience. For me, they summarise an aspect of the politics of care, and show that the idea is not new, but is necessary:

As it happens, and for reasons quite unconnected with these essays, I've been preparing to write something about George Orwell, whom I have always admired greatly as a person and writer, and I was struck once more by the way in which Orwell's moral vocabulary, and even universe, now seem so utterly removed from ours. For Orwell, the greatest virtues were honesty and authenticity, and his philosophy could be described in one word as "decency." He didn't really care what people thought about what he thought, and what he wrote, which is why he was a relatively unsuccessful journalist until the end of his life, attacked from all sides. Likewise, Socialism, I think, was for Orwell primarily a question of the creation of a decent society, where people didn't have to starve or live in unhealthy conditions. (He was always very critical of Utopianists of all persuasions: as he said, the point of Socialism was not to make things perfect, but at least to make them better.) Winston Smith's famous observation 1984 that "if there was hope it lay in the proles," was not a fantasy of some future revolution, but a pragmatic judgement that for any kind of society to survive at all, it was necessary to rely on the decency found among ordinary people, which the Party had abandoned as thoroughly as our current ruling class has.

It's hard to imagine such a vocabulary being employed today by our elites, or even at all. Orwell thought not simply that a decent society should be a political objective, but also that people should behave in their private lives and to each other with what he called "common decency." That didn't exclude some pretty sharp exchanges between Orwell and his opponents on literary and political issues, but all of his contemporaries agreed that he was never spiteful or personal. That sounds hilarious now, if you ever stumble accidentally into the slime-pits of contemporary social media, but it was much more the case in his day than now.

"Decency" has been made into an Unword now, along I suppose with "honour,"

“honesty,” “courage,” “shame” and other expressions which now form part of the glossary handed out to students obliged to read literature published before about 1980.

We need to reclaim these words. If the world is to survive, we must.

And let me stress that the whole article is worth reading. Aurélien asks an uncomfortable but necessary question: what happens when those who hold power no longer feel any moral obligation to others?

His argument is that modern political and economic systems increasingly reward those willing to ignore ethical constraints. In a world framed by self-interest, the common good is sidelined, and those most prepared to act without restraint are often those most likely to succeed.

The consequence is what might be called a systemic failure of morality. If individuals assume others will behave well, the greatest personal gain comes from exploiting that trust. When this logic operates at the top of society, where wealth and power are concentrated, the damage is magnified. Those with the greatest capacity to shape outcomes are also those least constrained by responsibility, creating a widening gap between public expectations of decency and elite behaviour.

The result is a breakdown in trust that cannot easily be repaired. Critically, most people still rely on cooperation, fairness and mutual obligation to make society function. But when those in charge act as if only personal advantage matters, the legitimacy of the whole system is called into question. A society that rewards moral indifference at the top risks not just inequality, but instability, and ultimately the erosion of the social fabric on which it depends.

This is an argument worth reflecting upon.

This is a Substack worth reading.