



THE BLOG 06/04/2012 03:10 pm ET | Updated Aug 04, 2012

God Loves David Brooks



By Marty Kaplan

The trouble with kids these days, writes *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, is that they convert “moral... questions about how to be” into “analytic questions about what to do.” Their mistake is to think that if “you are doing the sort of work that Bono celebrates, then you must be a good person.” They’re content to become utilitarians, pragmatists, problem-solvers; they’re going into community service, fighting poverty and ending disease as if those were answers to figuring out, “Around what ultimate purpose should your life revolve?” But, says Brooks, “You can devote your life to community service and be a schmuck.”

It’s not just kids. “Many people today,” he sighs, “have not been given vocabularies to talk about what virtue is, what character consists of, and in which way excellence lies.” We’re unprepared to address moral questions in moral terms. Knowing how to “structure your soul” to contend with “greed, frustration and failure,” Brooks concludes a recent column called “The Service Patch,” “requires fewer Excel spreadsheets, more Dostoyevsky and the Book of Job.”

I’m all for reading moral classics. But I’m also for reading more history. There’s more than one way to understand those texts, and there’s a way to understand history as a record of the damage that’s been done to people in the name of virtue.

The trouble isn’t that we lack a moral vocabulary; it’s that that language has long been a mask for wielding power. When people think pragmatically, it may not be because they weren’t taught to ask what Jesus would do, or what the Torah says; it could be because they believe that secular reasoning is more reasonable, because faith failed them or didn’t make sense, because you can think you know “how to be” and still be a schmuck.

This isn’t some Frenchie postmodernism I’m pushing. From Euripides to Shakespeare, Spinoza to Darwin, Tom Paine to John Rawls, Mark Twain to Wallace Stevens, part of the project of Western literature, philosophy and politics has been to lay bare the fictions of belief, the follies of virtue, the dangers of ultimate purposes. The task of progress has even been conceived as the opposite of what Brooks advocates: Our work is to replace the language of morals with the language of ethics, the authority of tradition with the process of deliberation, the revelation of divinity with the evidence of science.

This project creates its own problems. Its idea of progress can be a symptom of colossal narcissism. Its reliance on rationality can lead to the illusion that all problems are engineering problems — that “human nature” is just some social construction from which we need to liberate our thinking. Its reduction of thinking and feeling to synapses and circuits can explain reverence as a by-product of evolutionary biology and mystery as the residue of primitive superstition. Its grounding of values on earth instead of in heaven can be an invitation to solipsism, radical relativism, even nihilism.

That’s what Dostoyevsky is about. Raskolnikov, the nihilistic protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*, justifies murdering a pawnbroker on utilitarian grounds. Verhovensky in *The Devils* argues that a million deaths is an acceptable cost of political change. Ivan Karamazov rejects a God who condones the suffering of innocents, but what’s he’s left with is reason, which is impotent against evil.

Dostoyevsky offers an alternative to the nightmare of secularism: faith in the Russian Orthodox church. But — at least in my reading — the problem is that Dostoyevsky’s atheists are more believable than his believers, more convincing than his monks and priests. Besides, faith isn’t really a choice. To some, it’s a gift; to others, it’s an illusion. But its absence isn’t a consequence of carelessness, inattention or a generation of bean counters, which is what Brooks fears we’re raising. I think it’s legitimate to read Dostoyevsky, the Book of Job and the rest of the literature of virtue and conclude that the vocabulary of moral evaluation is no better at guiding us

than the language of actions and outcomes, and that it's more honest and helpful to frame problem-solving in utilitarian terms than it is to depict political decisions as Biblical struggles.

Ironically, David Brooks is a superb popularizer of the findings of modern neuroscience, social science and psychology. If you want to account for human behavior in material terms — if you think that understanding our hard-wiring is a more useful way to explain how we think, decide and believe than positing some homunculus in our brain — then Brooks is a good a tour guide of that research as anyone.

It's when he talks about souls that I part company with him. I do think our minds are more than gray goo; that materialism can't explain existence; that the experience of wonder, awe and radical amazement isn't a trick played on us by serotonin and oxytocin. But too many Grand Inquisitors have laid claim to an inside track on the salvation of souls, too many rulers have decreed that character consists of obedience and too many rich white men have had a monopoly over "which way excellence lies."

"Community service has become a patch for morality," says Brooks, using the language of software. But when it comes to moralizing, hegemony isn't a bug — it's a feature.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director