# For Goodness’ Sake

**by Theodore Dalrymple**

**Some years ago, in Australia,** I appeared on a platform with a prominent intellectual, many times more famous than I. We were asked what it took to be good.

The famous intellectual, who had had a brilliant career, answered that in order to be good, you had to be intelligent. When my turn came to answer, I said that the previous answer was not only wrong in fact but appalling in its implications.

It seemed to me, I said, that there was no connection between intelligence and goodness, and since the previous speaker was obviously referring to the 1 percent of the population or so that she thought might be approximately her intellectual equal, she was in effect saying that the vast majority of human beings could not be good. I count myself a misanthrope, but I am not as misanthropic as that.

She tried to deny that she had said any such thing, but the audience corrected her: She had indeed said it, and, without resorting to Freudian analysis, I think it revealed her true belief in the matter.

I know what she meant, however. To be good, you must have the right opinions about important abstract questions affecting humanity, and to have *those* you must be well-informed and capable of drawing correct conclusions from a large amount of information. In short, to be good you must both be highly intelligent and agree with me.

The intelligent are much given to the sin of pride, a sin that is not shared, in my experience, by the truly brilliant. Charles Dickens, for example, who knew himself to be a man of genius and called himself "the Inimitable" (which he certainly was), once wrote that he held his talent in trust. He meant by this that it was God-given and he had a duty to use it for the benefit of mankind. Few people have worked harder than he, but no amount of effort by itself would have sufficed to produce so many immortal characters and pages. For reasons that will never be elucidated, he was born with a spark that the rest of us do not have.

The idea of goodness as having the right ideas on abstract questions is a godsend to mediocrities. It allows them to learn and repeat a few phrases or formulae and think that they are good and therefore ought to have a special role to play in the direction of society.

I have no disdain for mediocrity and mediocrities as such; they are, indeed, very necessary to the functioning of any society, as is hypocrisy. (Try to imagine a world without hypocrisy—how dull, frightening, and unbearable it would be! There is, of course, hypocrisy and hypocrisy, of the laudable and necessary, and of the abominable and dangerous, kind, with everything in between.)

Mediocrity is very well in its place; among other things, it oils the wheels of administration. Much has to be done routinely, and if everyone were constantly brimming with brilliant ideas demanding that they be put immediately into practice, chaos would result. Besides, many people like to lead their lives as trains run on rails. It is as well that they exist. Moreover, even very talented people are usually mediocre in the largest parts of their lives.

But with the spread of the idea that goodness consists entirely of having the right ideas about the abstract questions of the day, presented in such few slogans that even the meanest of intelligences can grasp or memorize them, together with the seemingly obvious principle that the good should inherit the earth, the scene is set for a kind of prolonged coup d'état by the mediocre. And when it comes to the current crop of politicians in the Western world, many of them seem to have mediocrity inscribed on their faces.

By such, I do not mean that they make mistakes. Everyone does that. I mean that they look as though they lack the raw capacity to think properly. Perhaps even worse, they also look characterless, as if they had experienced nothing, or might as well have done so for all the trace experience has left on their faces. These do not even rise to the level of malignity or low cunning; they somehow convey the prolonged consumption of meals they have never had to pay for. When they smile, there is something triumphant in their expression, as if they were subliminally aware that they had triumphed in life without having fully deserved to do so.

The one characteristic that they have, however, is ambition. They are mediocre, not particularly intelligent, and characterless; but they are ravenously ambitious. Ambition, rationalized by supposed goodness, takes up all the mental space that should be occupied by other traits, thoughts, and desires. They are the kind of people who can endure any amount of boredom at a meeting, so long as it advances their career.

“Genius,” said Carlyle more or less, “is an infinite capacity for taking pains.” This is not so, but it certainly captures something about what is required to rise in a bureaucratic organization these days. Power does not so much grow out of the barrel of a gun, as Mao Tse-Tung put it, as out of the ability to get an item on the agenda of a meeting. The meeting is the bazooka of the apparatchik.

Of course, I am painting with a broad brush. Bureaucratic infighting is nothing new in the history of the world, nor is talent even now lacking. Scheming nonentities there have always been, and not a few of them were successful. But I do not remember a time when there seemed to be so many of them, or when the dark arts of infighting were so essential to success as measured by place in a hierarchy. The heads of universities used to be distinguished people; museums were run by scholars. Sloganeering was not a path to success and indeed was suspect as being indicative of intellectual incapacity. You don’t have to be intelligent to be good, nor do you have to be intelligent to succeed in modern organizations. I could give many concrete examples, but I wish to avoid legal complications.

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