
The Need for Knights in the 21st Century: Challenging Individualism and Extreme Egalitarianism

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Abstract: *Capitalism has many strengths however when capitalism becomes an ideology linked to certain strands of liberalism important social values are lost. Extreme individualism, social deviance in terms of the means to achieve success, and an extreme egalitarianism cast a veil of darkness covering selfishness, social anomie, and a complete disregard for the wellbeing of the weak and disadvantaged. The basic values of chivalry are as pertinent today as they were one thousand years ago. Encouraging the elites to adopt those values today would help ameliorate some of the negative externalities of capitalism without having to rely on coercive mechanisms of social control such as legislation, regulations, and punishment.*

1. Introduction

The ancient virtues of knights are as pertinent today as they were millennia ago (Bradford, 1991; Duren, 1995). Generosity, courtesy, chastity, chivalry, and piety are the five main virtues of knights. Each one is as important as the others and should be in balance. Technological changes, increased complexity in capital markets, and the ubiquity of social media may be interpreted as ushering in a completely new stage of human existence (Alldred & Gillies, 2008; Curtis, 1981; Shatkin, 2006; Wallerstein, 1976). Nevertheless, the challenges faced by humans remain constant. Love, competition over scarce resources, and human relationships remain at the center of human existence.

Capitalism and modernity have changed the incentive structure to a certain extent and this has resulted in some very serious negative externalities. The concept of anomie is well known by social scientists and has been connected to the rise of modernity and capitalism (Curtis, 1981; O. F. v. Feigenblatt, 2009). There is a disconnection between the community and the individual. Karl Marx explained how the detachment of the worker from the finished product has detrimental effects on the individual and for the community as a whole (O. F. v. Feigenblatt, 2009). Other important negative externalities are the rise of extreme individualism, social

The Need for Knights in the 21st Century: Challenging Individualism and Extreme Egalitarianism

deviance in terms of the means to achieving success, a lack of concern for the weak, and overreliance on external methods of control of human behavior (Macmillan, 2001).

The present paper discusses the five main virtues of knights and how they apply to modern (or post-modern society). Examples are taken from current events and connected to the application of different sets of value systems. Knights were and continue to strive for perfection. The virtues remain constant even if the context has changed. Living up to the standards of the knightly ideal is harder than ever but striving to do so is increasingly important in an age of moral relativism and extreme selfishness.

2. Generosity

One of the great challenges of the 21st century is to promote the virtue of charity (Akaha, 2009; Brant, 2013). This is especially difficult in countries with strong individualist tendencies. Social scientists have studied the decline in voluntarism in advanced industrialized nations as well as the concomitant decline in social cohesion. One of the negative externalities of capitalism is the emphasis on private gain over the public good (Ashley & Orenstein, 2005). According to traditional liberal theory, the invisible hand of the market aggregates selfish decisions into a common good (Ashley & Orenstein, 2005; O. v. Feigenblatt, 2009). It is clear that this conclusion is not always valid. Great inequalities in terms of access to resources are reflected in extreme poverty coexisting next to great wealth.

Inequality is not new and it is a fact that diversity implies inequality (Bem, 1993). People have different abilities, skill sets, experiences, and dispositions. However, the challenge is for those who have positions of power or simply greater abilities than the majority of the population to understand that the well being of the entire community concerns them. At the macro level the importance of this simple assertion is lost in abstraction but at the individual level it is a very clear imperative. The strong should protect and assist the weak. This is a very old and almost cliché statement that embodies the virtue of generosity. Generosity goes beyond simple charity and instead permeates almost every action (Hook, Worthington, & Utsey, 2008; Hunter & Thorpe, 2005). It includes the idea of helping in small ways and also of giving people the benefit of the doubt. Generosity also implies a certain detachment from worldly comforts in favor of the satisfaction of giving. Once again it should be noted that generosity is not restricted to giving material good but can also include giving love, emotional support, and even advice (Hook et al., 2008; Hunter & Thorpe, 2005).

Generosity not only helps the person with the virtue but those around him or her. One of the reasons for the sharp decrease in this virtue in modern capitalist societies is a fallacy of absolute equality (Augsburger, 1992). The principle that everyone is equal is such a strong ideological tenet that contrary to constant evidence people living in modern liberal democracies tend to hold it as an almost sacred belief. Nevertheless, IQ is not distributed equally in the population, not everyone has the same education level, and not everyone can compete at an Olympic level (Lane, 2011). Such obvious facts are clouded by a misunderstanding of legal equality. Equality in the eyes of the law does not imply absolute equality (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007). The legal principle of equality is a sound idea but its extrapolation to the social arena and to the public sphere is not only faulty but it is detrimental to those least advantaged.

One very good example in practice of the application of this extreme interpretation of the equality principle is the difference in terms of the relationship between the patron and employee in a traditional Latin American society versus its equivalent in the United States. Needless to mention, this is an extreme generalization representing what Max Webber would call ideal types of patron-client relations in two very diverse and complex societies (Weber, 2004, 2005). The patron client relation in a traditional Latin American society implies strong bilateral duties. It more closely resembles a Confucian relationship between lord and subject than a simple monetary transaction. The patron in Latin America has duties towards the client that transcend their narrow business relationship. For example it is the social duty of the patron to sponsor certain celebrations for their employees such as baptisms and in some cases even weddings (Eakin, 2007). The duty to sponsor such important social events reflects the very obvious fact that the patron has more resources than the employee and that because of that and partly in exchange for social authority and influence certain public duties are present.

Generosity is a sign of greatness rather than considering acts of charity as favors toward a particular person or group it should be interpreted as an outward sign of both sacrifice and success. Therefore social respect should require certain sacrifices from elites. It should be noted that generosity transcends monetary donations but also implies the use of influence or authority to help those in need. In many cases putting in a good word for someone to get a job is as valuable as a monetary donation. Lobbying for better conditions for certain groups can also be considered an act of charity.

In conclusion, the knightly virtue of generosity is even more necessary today in an age of extreme economic inequality and under the illusion of social equality. Elites need to earn their social respect and generosity is one way of doing so. Thus, the incentive structure of capitalism coupled with the illusion of absolute social

The Need for Knights in the 21st Century: Challenging Individualism and Extreme Egalitarianism

equality without the virtue of generosity result in predatory relationships void of any deeper community bonds and a complete disregard for social responsibility.

3. Courtesy in the 21st Century

The author has written elsewhere about the worrying decrease in courtesy in particular in advanced industrialized societies (Feigenblatt, 2014). Lack of courtesy can be indirectly observed by paying attention to the decline in social etiquette. Courtesy is not perfectly synonymous with etiquette but rather an external observable sign of its presence. Courtesy is about showing respect to facilitate social interaction. One of the challenges with promoting courtesy in the 21st century is the fallacy of absolute equality. A veteran who has served five tours does not deserve the same respect as a multiple felon. This may seem obvious but the emphasis on absolute rights obscures important differences which in turn lead to a disregard for the minimum requirements of courtesy and etiquette.

The knightly virtue of courtesy should be an intrinsic value completely separate from any legal requirements. Legal norms do not require people to greet friends but that does not make it any less important. In many cases the argument used by opponents of the promotion of courtesy as a social norm is the well trodden “cultural relativism” argument (Sponsel, 1994). The argument posits that because there are many subcultures in existence there is a lack of social consensus on what constitutes the proper expression of courtesy. Moreover that social respect is also contested because a veteran may deserve considerable respect according to a patriot but not as much according to a pacifist. The main weakness of this argument is that the department of protocol in the ministries of foreign affairs usually publishes a list of precedence and also a guide for diplomats to follow in terms of etiquette and courtesy. It is internationally accepted that diplomatic protocol is the pinnacle of etiquette and also embodies the ideals of that particular nation state. Another advantage of using diplomatic protocol as a starting point is that it contradicts the argument that there are no legal precedents regulating protocol (Kissinger, 1994).

Hypothetical ideal case scenarios are very useful to depict the importance of courtesy in the 21st century. One very common example is ceding the right of way to a lady. This is considered to be good manners in most Western countries. Nevertheless, in many situations directly observed by the author members of certain subcultures openly refuse to observe this social norm and when reprimanded for the breach of protocol react violently to what they consider to be a form of cultural imperialism. Other similar examples include controlling the pitch and tone in speech in public spaces and issues of private space. Cultural differences in terms of acceptable personal distance have been studied extensively by

anthropologists (Clark, 1989). Nevertheless those differences varying widely from culture to culture may lead to very interesting studies about native American civilizations but cannot be extrapolated to the current challenges faced by advanced industrialized societies. The acceptance of loud speech in the Amazon does not contradict the norms of diplomacy. Therefore, the illogical attempt by certain subcultures to contest the norms of civility by claiming cultural relativism or in some instances by defending the rights of cultural minorities to their own culture is a non sequitur.

Tolerance can be mistaken for acceptance. Many Western societies confuse tolerance for acceptance and even for admiration. This confusion further exacerbates the complete disregard for courtesy and basic social norms of behavior. A person walking a dog in a park may tolerate the mosquitoes buzzing around him but does not mean that the person accepts the behavior as positive nor that he admires the attempts of the mosquitoes to bite him. Social sanctions have served for millennia to provide incentives for the people to conform to important social norms. Sanctions usually include the possibility of social ostracism, dirty looks, and verbal reprimands (Roht-Arriaza & Gibson, 1998). Nevertheless the artificial legislation against any form of social intolerance, even that directed against a behavior rather than a person, has resulted in a sad “chilling effect” on one of the most important paths to socialization and propagation of social norms. Thus, publicly reprimanding a stranger for not opening the door for a lady is considered out of the question in most Western countries and requesting an adult to lower their tone of voice in a public place can be interpreted by defenders of absolute human rights and cultural relativism as the start of a new “ethnic cleansing” in the Western world. Notwithstanding the temporary empowerment the deviant member society may experience from restricting social sanctions and corrective free speech, the result is a growing frustration and anger on the part of norm abiding members of society. This is considerably more dangerous than allowing the expressing of rightful and legitimate indignation over the breach of a social norm related to courtesy with the purpose of reestablishing proper social interaction. The danger is that the gap between norm abiding members of society and those deviating from those norms will continue to widen. It should be noted that there are two main types of deviant members of society in terms of breaching norms of courtesy. The first type rejects those norms out of principle and the second may do so unknowingly simply because of lack of understanding of those norms. Restricting corrective reprimands isolates the second type from the possibility of socialization and thus from fully integrating into society and instead make them more susceptible to radical ideologies in favor of the rejection of conformity.

4. Chastity and its importance in the 21st Century

Chastity as an ideal for lay members of society does not entail absolute abstinence from sexual relations but rather following the proper norms for this activity. The Catholic Church is very clear about the importance and limits to this activity. Sexual activity must be limited to married couples. This simple rule has a social purpose in that it supports the most basic unit of society which is the family. The protection of the traditional family is a daunting task that requires the help of the lay community. Attacks from the media, liberal politicians, and from deviant communities have endangered the very nature of the family. The family is based on a lot of more than sexual relations but their regulation guarantees its stability and form.

Control over one's behavior is one of the most important challenges and a true sign of power and virtue. Deviating from the prescribed sexual relations can result in a breakdown of the family which in turn has a vast array of negative externalities such as problems for those interacting with the family in question. There is considerable evidence that deviant sexual relations can lead to the breakdown of the traditional family (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Feigenblatt, 2010). This assertion is supported by statistics showing a strong correlation between extramarital relations and divorce rates. It is very clear that extramarital relations can also lead to higher rates of conflict and even to violence. Therefore even if one obviates the moral arguments in favor of keeping ones marriage vows, from a social perspective chastity as defined by the norms of a traditional marriage decreases negative externalities such as conflict, violence, and costly litigation. Emotional issues are also involved for the children and for those interacting with the deviant subjects.

5. The Importance of Piety

Traditionally piety has been defined as commitment to a religious belief (Devare, 2009). Nevertheless for the purposes of this paper its definition can be expanded to dedication to an ideal or set of moral values. Commitment to a set of ideas is important in this age of relativism as a way to slow the breakdown of social norms and values. Piety is also a good way to focus ones energy and attention in the direction of an important goal. Commitment can lead to higher productivity and increases both efficiency and effectiveness both in and out of the workplace (Rohrbaugh, 2005). Therefore young people can lead more fulfilling and successful lives if they nurture this important virtue. Piety and devotion to an ideal of cause can lead to great sacrifices in order to achieve a goal or pursuit. With increasing competition at the local and international levels it is imperative to instill commitment on the younger generations. It is also pivotal to strengthen faith on important social values and pillars so as to counterbalance pernicious trends

questioning the very pillars of our civilization. Notwithstanding our entreaty to foster piety and devotion it is not our intention to foster the development of mindless robots nor of passionate zealots but rather to return to the enlightenment ideal of the informed scholar who willingly engages in constructive dialogue to defend the most basic principles of our social fabric.

6. Conclusions

Seeking virtue and constantly striving for self-improvement is a timeless ideal that was best exemplified by the noble virtues of knighthood. The present paper has discussed each of the five cardinal virtues and explained how their pertinence is as prescient today as it was eight hundred years ago. History teaches us that a civilization that stops supporting self-discipline and instead worships weakness and vice ultimately declines into oblivion. The staunch defense of an ideal, sacrifice, discipline, and devotion to self-improvement were hallmark traits of the knights of yore and continue to inspire thousands of present day knights.

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The Need for Knights in the 21st Century: Challenging Individualism and Extreme Egalitarianism

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