

The Humility Code

Each society creates its own moral ecology. A moral ecology is a set of norms, assumptions, beliefs, and habits of behavior and an institutionalized set of moral demands that emerge organically. Our moral ecology encourages us to be a certain sort of person. When you behave consistently with your society's moral ecology, people smile at you, and you are encouraged to continue acting in that way. The moral ecology of a given moment is never unanimous; there are always rebels, critics, and outsiders. But each moral climate is a collective response to the problems of the moment and it shapes the people who live within it.

Over the past several decades we have built a moral ecology around the Big Me, around the belief in a golden figure inside. This has led to a rise in narcissism and self-aggrandizement. This has encouraged us to focus on the external Adam I side of our natures and ignore the inner world of Adam II.

To restore the balance, to rediscover Adam II, to cultivate the eulogy virtues, it's probably necessary to revive and follow what we accidentally left behind: the counter-tradition of moral realism, or what I've been calling the crooked-timber school. It's probably necessary to build a moral ecology based on the ideas of this school, to follow its answers to the most important questions: Toward what should I orient my life? Who am I and what is my nature? How do I mold my nature to make it gradually better day by day? What virtues are the most important to cultivate and what weaknesses should I fear the most? How can I raise my children with a true sense of who they are and a practical set of ideas about how to travel the long road to character?

So far the propositions that define the crooked-timber tradition have been scattered across the

many chapters that make up this book. I thought it might be useful to draw them together and recapitulate them here in one list, even if presenting them in numbered-list form does tend to simplify them and make them seem cruder than they are. Together these propositions form a Humility Code, a coherent image of what to live for and how to live. These are the general propositions that form this Humility Code:

1. We don't live for happiness, we live for holiness. Day to day we seek out pleasure, but deep down, human beings are endowed with moral imagination. All human beings seek to lead lives not just of pleasure, but of purpose, righteousness, and virtue. As John Stuart Mill put it, people have a responsibility to become more moral over time. The best life is oriented around the increasing excellence of the soul and is nourished by moral joy, the quiet sense of gratitude and tranquillity that comes as a byproduct of successful moral struggle. The meaningful life is the same eternal thing, the combination of some set of ideals and some man or woman's struggle for those ideals. Life is essentially a moral drama, not a hedonistic one.
2. Proposition one defines the goal of life. The long road to character begins with an accurate understanding of our nature, and the core of that understanding is that we are flawed creatures. We have an innate tendency toward selfishness and overconfidence. We have a tendency to see ourselves as the center of the universe, as if everything revolves around us. We resolve to do one thing but end up doing the opposite. We know what is deep and important in life, but we still pursue the things that are shallow and vain. Furthermore, we overestimate our own strength and rationalize our own failures. We know less than we think we do. We give in to short-term desires even when we know we shouldn't. We imagine that spiritual and moral needs can be solved through status and material things.
3. Although we are flawed creatures, we are also splendidly endowed. We are divided within ourselves, both fearfully and wonderfully made. We do sin, but we also have the capacity to recognize sin, to feel ashamed of sin, and to overcome sin. We are both weak and strong, bound and free, blind and far-seeing. We thus have the capacity to struggle with ourselves. There is something heroic about a person in struggle with herself, strained on the rack of conscience, suffering torments, yet staying alive and growing stronger, sacrificing a worldly success for the sake of an inner victory.
4. In the struggle against your own weakness, humility is the greatest virtue. Humility is having

an accurate assessment of your own nature and your own place in the cosmos. Humility is awareness that you are an underdog in the struggle against your own weakness. Humility is an awareness that your individual talents alone are inadequate to the tasks that have been assigned to you. Humility reminds you that you are not the center of the universe, but you serve a larger order.

5. Pride is the central vice. Pride is a problem in the sensory apparatus. Pride blinds us to the reality of our divided nature. Pride blinds us to our own weaknesses and misleads us into thinking we are better than we are. Pride makes us more certain and closed-minded than we should be. Pride makes it hard for us to be vulnerable before those whose love we need. Pride makes coldheartedness and cruelty possible. Because of pride we try to prove we are better than those around us. Pride deludes us into thinking that we are the authors of our own lives.
6. Once the necessities for survival are satisfied, the struggle against sin and for virtue is the central drama of life. No external conflict is as consequential or as dramatic as the inner campaign against our own deficiencies. This struggle against, say, selfishness or prejudice or insecurity gives meaning and shape to life. It is more important than the external journey up the ladder of success. This struggle against sin is the great challenge, so that life is not futile or absurd. It is possible to fight this battle well or badly, humorlessly or with cheerful spirit. Contending with weakness often means choosing what parts of yourself to develop and what parts not to develop. The purpose of the struggle against sin and weakness is not to "win," because that is not possible; it is to get better at waging it. It doesn't matter if you work at a hedge fund or a charity serving the poor. There are heroes and schmucks in both worlds. The most important thing is whether you are willing to engage in this struggle.
7. Character is built in the course of your inner confrontation. Character is a set of dispositions, desires, and habits that are slowly engraved during the struggle against your own weakness. You become more disciplined, considerate, and loving through a thousand small acts of self-control, sharing, service, friendship, and refined enjoyment. If you make disciplined, caring choices, you are slowly engraving certain tendencies into your mind. You are making it more likely that you will desire the right things and execute the right actions. If you make selfish, cruel, or disorganized choices, then you are slowly turning this core thing inside yourself into something that is degraded, inconstant, or fragmented. You can do harm to this core thing

with nothing more than ignoble thoughts, even if you are not harming anyone else. You can elevate this core thing with an act of restraint nobody sees. If you don't develop a coherent character in this way, life will fall to pieces sooner or later. You will become a slave to your passions. But if you do behave with habitual self-discipline, you will become constant and dependable.

8. The things that lead us astray are short term—lust, fear, vanity, gluttony. The things we call character endure over the long term—courage, honesty, humility. People with character are capable of a long obedience in the same direction, of staying attached to people and causes and callings consistently through thick and thin. People with character also have scope. They are not infinitely flexible, free-floating, and solitary. They are anchored by permanent attachments to important things. In the realm of the intellect, they have a set of permanent convictions about fundamental truths. In the realm of emotion, they are enmeshed in a web of unconditional loves. In the realm of action, they have a **permanent commitment to tasks that cannot be completed in a single lifetime.**
9. No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed, and self-deception. Everybody needs redemptive assistance from outside—from God, family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, and exemplars. If you are to prosper in the confrontation with yourself, you have to put yourself in a state of affection. You have to draw on something outside yourself to cope with the forces inside yourself. You have to draw from a cultural tradition that educates the heart, that encourages certain values, that teaches us what to feel in certain circumstances. We wage our struggles in conjunction with others waging theirs, and the boundaries between us are indistinct.
10. We are all ultimately saved by grace. The struggle against weakness often has a U shape. You are living your life and then you get knocked off course—either by an overwhelming love, or by failure, illness, loss of employment, or twist of fate. The shape is advance-retreat-advance. In retreat, you admit your need and surrender your crown. You open up space that others might fill. And grace floods in. It may come in the form of love from friends and family, in the assistance of an unexpected stranger, or from God. But the message is the same. You are accepted. You don't flail about in desperation, because hands are holding you up. You don't

have to struggle for a place, because you are embraced and accepted. You just have to accept the fact that you are accepted. Gratitude fills the soul, and with it the desire to serve and give back.

11. Defeating weakness often means quieting the self. Only by quieting the self, by muting the sound of your own ego, can you see the world clearly. Only by quieting the self can you be open to the external sources of strengths you will need. Only by stilling the sensitive ego can you react with equipoise to the ups and downs of the campaign. The struggle against weakness thus requires the habits of self-effacement—reticence, modesty, obedience to some larger thing—and a capacity for reverence and admiration.
12. Wisdom starts with epistemological modesty. The world is immeasurably complex and the private stock of reason is small. We are generally not capable of understanding the complex web of causes that drive events. We are not even capable of grasping the unconscious depths of our own minds. We should be skeptical of abstract reasoning or of trying to apply universal rules across different contexts. But over the centuries, our ancestors built up a general bank of practical wisdom, traditions, habits, manners, moral sentiments, and practices. The humble person thus has an acute historical consciousness. She is the grateful inheritor of the tacit wisdom of her kind, the grammar of conduct and the store of untaught feelings that are ready for use in case of emergency, that offer practical tips on how to behave in different situations, and that encourage habits that cohere into virtues. The humble person understands that experience is a better teacher than pure reason. He understands that wisdom is not knowledge. Wisdom emerges out of a collection of intellectual virtues. It is knowing how to behave when perfect knowledge is lacking.
13. No good life is possible unless it is organized around a vocation. If you try to use your work to serve yourself, you'll find your ambitions and expectations will forever run ahead and you'll never be satisfied. If you try to serve the community, you'll always wonder if people appreciate you enough. But if you serve work that is intrinsically compelling and focus just on being excellent at that, you will wind up serving yourself and the community obliquely. A vocation is not found by looking within and finding your passion. It is found by looking without and asking what life is asking of us. What problem is addressed by an activity you intrinsically enjoy?
14. The best leader tries to lead along the grain of human nature rather than go against it. He

realizes that he, like the people he leads, is likely to be sometimes selfish, narrow-minded, and self-deceiving. Therefore he prefers arrangements that are low and steady to those that are lofty and heroic. As long as the foundations of an institution are sound, he prefers change that is constant, gradual, and incremental to change that is radical and sudden. He understands that public life is a contest between partial truths and legitimate contesting interests. The goal of leadership is to find a just balance between competing values and competing goals. He seeks to be a trimmer, to shift weight one way or another as circumstances change, in order to keep the boat moving steadily forward on an even keel. He understands that in politics and business the lows are lower than the highs are high. The downside risk caused by bad decisions is larger than the upside benefits that accrue from good ones. Therefore the wise leader is a steward for his organization and tries to pass it along in slightly better condition than he found it.

15. The person who successfully struggles against weakness and sin may or may not become rich and famous, but that person will become mature. Maturity is not based on talent or any of the mental or physical gifts that help you ace an IQ test or run fast or move gracefully. It is not comparative. It is earned not by being better than other people at something, but by being better than you used to be. It is earned by being dependable in times of testing, straight in times of temptation. Maturity does not glitter. It is not built on the traits that make people celebrities. A mature person possesses a settled unity of purpose. The mature person has moved from fragmentation to centeredness, has achieved a state in which the restlessness is over, the confusion about the meaning and purpose of life is calmed. The mature person can make decisions without relying on the negative and positive reactions from admirers or detractors because the mature person has steady criteria to determine what is right. That person has said a multitude of noes for the sake of a few overwhelming yeses.

Modes of Living

The characters in this book followed many different courses and had many different traits. Some, like Augustine and Johnson, were quite introspective. Others, like Eisenhower and Randolph, were not. Some, like Perkins, were willing to soil their hands in politics in order to get things done.

Others, like Day, wanted not only to do good but to be good, to live a life that was as pure as possible. Some of these figures, like Johnson and Day, were very hard on themselves. They felt the need to arduously attack their own weaknesses. Others, like Montaigne, accepted themselves and had a lighter and more relaxed attitude toward life, trusting in nature to take care of life's essential problems. Some, like Ida Eisenhower, Philip Randolph, and Perkins, were private people, a little detached and emotionally reticent. Others, like Augustine and Rustin, exposed themselves emotionally. Some, like Day, were saved by religion, while others, like Eliot, were harmed by religion or were, like Marshall, not religious. Some, like Augustine, surrendered agency and let grace flood in. Others, like Johnson, took control of life and built their soul through effort.

Even within the tradition of moral realism, there are many differences of temperament, technique, tactics, and taste. Two people who both subscribe to the "crooked timber" view may approach specific questions in different ways. Should you stay in your suffering or move on from it as soon as possible? Should you keep a journal to maximize self-awareness, or does that just lead to paralyzing self-consciousness and self-indulgence? Should you be reticent or expressive? Should you take control of your own life or surrender it to God's grace?

Even within the same moral ecology, there's a lot of room for each person to chart a unique path. But each of the lives in this book started with a deep vulnerability, and undertook a lifelong effort to transcend that vulnerability. Johnson was fragmented and storm-tossed. Rustin was hollow and promiscuous. Marshall was a fearful boy. Eliot was desperate for affection. And yet each person was redeemed by that weakness. Each person struggled against that weakness and used that problem to grow a beautiful strength. Each person traveled down into the valley of humility in order to ascend

to the heights of tranquility and self-respect.

Stumblers

The good news of this book is that it is okay to be flawed, since everyone is. Sin and limitation are woven through our lives. We are all stumblers, and the beauty and meaning of life are in the stumbling—in recognizing the stumbling and trying to become more graceful as the years go by.

The stumbler scuffs through life, a little off balance here and there, sometimes lurching, sometimes falling to her knees. But the stumbler faces her imperfect nature, her mistakes and weaknesses, with unvarnished honesty, with the opposite of squeamishness. She is sometimes ashamed of the perversities in her nature—the selfishness, the self-deceit, the occasional desire to put lower loves above higher ones.

But humility offers self-understanding. When we acknowledge that we screw up, and feel the gravity of our limitations, we find ourselves challenged and stretched with a serious foe to overcome and transcend.

The stumbler is made whole by this struggle. Each weakness becomes a chance to wage a campaign that organizes and gives meaning to life and makes you a better person. We lean on each other as we struggle against sin. We depend on each other for the forgiveness of sin. The stumbler has an outstretched arm, ready to receive and offer care. He is vulnerable enough to need affection and is generous enough to give affection at full volume. If we were without sin, we could be solitary Atlases, but the stumbler requires a community. His friends are there with conversation and advice. His ancestors have left him diverse models that he can emulate and measure himself by.

From the smallness of her own life, the stumbler commits herself to ideas and faiths that are nobler than any individual ever could be. She doesn't always live up to her convictions or follow her resolutions. But she repents and is redeemed and tries again, a process that gives dignity to her failing. The victories follow the same arc: from defeat to recognition to redemption. Down into the valley of vision and then up into the highlands of attachment. The humble path to the beautiful life.

Each struggle leaves a residue. A person who has gone through these struggles seems more

substantial and deep. And by a magic alchemy these victories turn weakness into joy. The stumbler doesn't aim for joy. Joy is a byproduct experienced by people who are aiming for something else. But it comes.

There's joy in a life filled with interdependence with others, in a life filled with gratitude, reverence, and admiration. There's joy in freely chosen obedience to people, ideas, and commitments greater than oneself. There's joy in that feeling of acceptance, the knowledge that though you don't deserve their love, others do love you; they have admitted you into their lives. There's an aesthetic joy we feel in morally good action, which makes all other joys seem paltry and easy to forsake.

People do get better at living, at least if they are willing to humble themselves and learn. Over time they stumble less, and eventually they achieve moments of catharsis when outer ambition comes into balance with inner aspiration, when there is a unity of effort between Adam I and Adam II, when there is that ultimate tranquility and that feeling of flow—when moral nature and external skills are united in one defining effort.

Joy is not produced because others praise you. Joy emanates unbidden and unforced. Joy comes as a gift when you least expect it. At those fleeting moments you know why you were put here and what truth you serve. You may not feel giddy at those moments, you may not hear the orchestra's delirious swell or see flashes of crimson and gold, but you will feel a satisfaction, a silence, a peace—a hush. Those moments are the blessings and the signs of a beautiful life.