

Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, New York, Basic Books, 2020, 366 p.

The Final Work of the Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is a difficult title to do justice to; such is the moniker for *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), published just half a year before Mr. Sacks' death.

One should like to end their career able to reflect on the betterment of the world throughout their lives, that they might feel a part of a great history of mankind's technological, cultural, and moral progress. Regrettably, Mr. Sacks had no such privilege: even though he claims that „this is not a work of cultural pessimism”, his last book paints a thoroughly pessimistic picture of the moral landscape, suggesting that, as things stand, we are on a slippery slope with even worse social, political, and economic fragmentation and polarization on the horizon. He explores the historical, philosophical, and cultural factors that have shaped contemporary ethics, focusing on the decline of shared moral values which he attributes to the rise of individualism. Mr. Sacks argues that these trends have contributed to the current divisions within society, and these same reasons are what will drive us further apart.

Mr. Sacks traces the roots of Western society's moral disintegration to the Enlightenment when individualism and reason began to replace religious and communal values as the guiding forces of society. He contends that the gradual shift towards prioritizing personal freedom and autonomy has led to a fragmentation of shared moral values and a weakening of communal bonds. While acknowledging the many positive contributions of the Enlightenment, Mr. Sacks argues that its focus on the individual has fostered a culture of selfishness and moral relativism that has ultimately proved detrimental to the health of society as a whole.

He goes on to highlight the extreme individualism that emerged in the 1960s as a turning point in this decline of communal values. He asserts that this era, which he calls "an endless summer of experiment and fun with no bill to pay for our transgressions", characterized by a rejection of traditional authority and an embrace of personal freedom, led to widespread social consequences such as loneliness, family breakdown, and the rise of identity politics. These developments, in turn, have exacerbated societal divisions and created an 'us versus them' mentality, further undermining shared moral values and social cohesion.

Mr. Sacks also critiques the consumer mindset that prioritizes individual needs and desires and fosters a culture of selfishness and short-term thinking. This, in turn, undermines social cohesion and exacerbates economic inequality. As individuals increasingly view relationships, work, and even citizenship through the lens of consumerism, the importance of loyalty and commitment to others is diminished, eroding social bonds as people become more focused on their own interests and less concerned with the welfare of their fellow citizens. Furthermore, Mr. Sacks argues that the growing economic inequality in Western societies is a direct result of this consumer mindset. As individuals prioritize their personal gain, they may disregard the impact of their actions on others and the larger community. This can lead to a widening gap between the rich and the poor, resulting in further societal divisions and tensions.

Of course, he is also critical of the abdication of responsibility that accompanies the consumer mindset. As people become more focused on their own wants and needs, they may be less willing to take responsibility for their actions and their impact on others. With individualism has not come personal responsibility, which one might think would go hand in hand with it. Instead, people have become lazy, selfish, and entitled: „Rights have ceased to be restrictions on the scope of the state” he says, „and have become instead entitlements, demands for action by the state”.

He argues that the decline of traditional religious and moral authority has left a moral vacuum in society, leading to further disorientation and

division. „Societal freedom cannot be sustained by market economics and liberal democratic politics alone” says Mr. Sacks: „It needs a third element: morality, a concern for the welfare of others, an active commitment to justice and compassion, a willingness to ask not just what is good for me but what is good for ‚all of us together””. He offers several recommendations to strengthen the bonds of community and re-establish a shared sense of moral purpose.

He emphasizes the importance of personal moral responsibility, such as cultivating virtues like empathy, compassion, and humility. By fostering these values in individuals, he contends that society can create an environment where people are more inclined to work together for the common good. „To begin to make a difference, all we need to do is to change ourselves”, he writes. Morality begins with us. „We do not need to wait for a great political leader, or an upturn in the economy, or a new mood in society, or an unexpected technological breakthrough, to begin to change the moral climate”.

Additionally, he advocates for rebuilding institutions such as religious organizations, community groups, and educational establishments, which he believes play a crucial role in promoting shared values and fostering social cohesion. By investing in these institutions and encouraging active participation, communities can create a sense of belonging and shared purpose that counters the fragmentation and polarization resulting from individualism.

He also urges individuals to prioritize the common good over self-interest, recognizing the importance of social responsibility, cooperation, and self-sacrifice for the well-being of the broader community. By promoting the common good and nurturing a sense of shared identity that transcends individual differences, he believes that society can begin to rebuild trust, foster cooperation, and ultimately create a more cohesive and harmonious social fabric.

While Mr. Sacks’ argument for a renewed commitment to the common good is stirring, his message may be seen as idealistic by some. The challenges he identifies are deeply entrenched, and it remains to be seen whether his suggested solutions will be effective in reversing the trends he describes. Likewise, will such an optimistic picture of the human condition – at least before it was corrupted by modernity – survive the „abrasive” and „sometimes brutal” world of politics?

Mr. Sack’s theory might also be accused of failing to fully account for the complex interplay of forces that have shaped the current ethical landscape. In contrast to his tracing of the decline of shared moral values to the Enlightenment and the rise of individualism, it is possible that other

factors, such as technological change and globalization, have also played a significant role in these developments. This complexity might be reflected in the openness of the question of the cause of moral progress, which is another difficulty for Mr. Sacks' view. Steven Pinker, in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (New York: Viking Books, 2011), and Michael Shermer, in *The Moral Arc* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015) provide compelling accounts of how, over time, societies have become less violent, more tolerant, and more committed to human rights and well-being. They associate these improvements with Enlightenment values, including reason, science, and individualism, which have contributed to the expansion of human empathy, cooperation, and understanding, which is in stark contrast to the pessimistic story told by Mr. Sacks.

Whether his account of the slippery slope of moral decline in the past two centuries is accurate or not, his suggestions for strengthening the bonds of community, restoring moral responsibility, and re-establishing a shared sense of moral purpose, provide valuable insights for those seeking to address the challenges of societal fragmentation and polarization. While it remains to be seen whether his proposed solutions will prove effective in reversing these trends, his book stands as an important call to action for those concerned with the future of our societies and the moral foundations upon which they are built.

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