Moral Exo-Skeletons and Endo-Skeletons: A Key Divide in the American Body Politic

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In the months after the 2004 election, when the Red States were said to have voted on the basis of their “moral values,” many observers noted that the sleazy television shows and movies so energetically denounced by the traditionalist and Christian right also tend to get their highest ratings in the same parts of the country most populated by such people. (They noted, as well, that some of the family pathologies that traditionalists decry are found at high rates among these most vocal proponents of “family values.”)

Some took this as a clear indication of the hypocrisy of conservatives: what they denounce, they also secretly enjoy. They aren’t as concerned about morality, this critique declared, as they pretend to be; while they maintain a posture of devotion to righteousness, they’re indulging their forbidden impulses in hidden ways.

Jimmy Swaggart writ large.

But I don’t think “hypocrisy” is the most illuminating way of seeing this phenomenon. Not if hypocrisy is understood as a form of deliberate dishonesty. A more illuminating view comes from looking at the matter of “moral structure.”

From my discussions of morality with religious traditionalists, I’ve gleaned that many of them assume that people who don’t believe in their firm and strict moral structures—people who don’t believe in God, the Ten Commandments, or inviolable and absolute rules of moral conduct—must be living lives of sin and debauchery. They can’t understand—and often seem unwilling even to believe—that people like Humanists might be living the kind of well-ordered lives, as hard-working and law-abiding citizens responsible and dedicated to their families, that they themselves strive to live.

Their failure to understand how non-believing “liberals” can live moral lives is actually the reverse side of the same coin from the liberals’ imputation of hypocrisy to those Red-Staters who watch Desperate Housewives and may also have disordered family lives.

These misunderstandings stem from the failure of the two groups to recognize their differing moral structures.

Differences in the Locus of Control
A student of mine in an adult education class focusing on “America’s Moral Crisis” came up with the most apt image. It didn’t matter much to her, she said, whether her society has a lot of enforced rules. She’s got her moral beliefs firmly inside her—a kind of endo-skeleton, she called it.

We had been talking about the distress American traditionalists have felt at the erosion of a social consensus about the straight-and-narrow path. Morality for them, she said, seemed to be a kind of exo-skeleton. This was her image to capture their reliance on external moral structures—laws, punishments, and so forth—to keep them within the moral confines in which they believe.

In that perspective, the assumed anomalies or hypocrisies of certain traditionalists make greater sense.

It becomes clear why such people—possessing intense moral concerns, combined with a reliance on external moral structures to keep their own forbidden impulses in check—would support a state that enforces moral rules and a social culture that stigmatizes those who violate those rules. It really is a threat to them—a threat to their own inner moral order—when the society around them fails to be clear in its rules and strict in its enforcement.

For one whose moral structure is cast in that exo-skeleton form, the absence of external moral authority seems necessarily to imply the outbreak of moral anarchy. That’s the logic implied by the famous line from Fyodor Dostoevski’s The Brothers Karamazov: “if there is no God, everything is permitted.” It’s what lies behind the fear that if gays are allowed to marry, marriage generally would somehow be threatened, including the sanctity of one’s own.

To the liberal with the endoskeleton structure, both of those seem like logical non sequiturs. And, logically, perhaps they are. But they bespeak a psychological reality. If the outside structure breaks down, who knows what one might do?

Liberals have often failed to understand how the loosening of society’s moral standards, rules, and sanctions can be genuinely threatening to the moral order of those with the exo-skeleton structure. They haven’t appreciated the plight of people who deeply want to toe the line, and need help in doing it.

Likewise, many liberals have responded with anger, unleavened by understanding, to the tendency of some traditionalists to try to impose their moral views on others. It is their dependence on the strength and integrity of the external moral order that drives many “exo-skeletons” to crusade to make the whole world around them conform to the moral system to which they themselves are striving to adhere. The unspoken—and generally unacknowledged—need is: please, society, be morally strict enough to keep me on the straight-and-narrow path.

*Integrity and Hypocrisy: The Challenge to the Exo-Skeletons*

These fears of traditionalists reflect a lack of integration—the morality not fully integrated into the psyche.
St. Paul lamented: "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do." Truly, he wanted to do the good. But it is not entirely true that the evil he did was something he wanted not. For a part of him did want it, or he wouldn't have done it. So was Paul a hypocrite for doing what he declared himself to be against? And are the Red-Staters hypocrites if they indulge—perhaps more even than the liberals—the forbidden desires?

Well, yes and no. Yes, in that they aren't practicing what they preach. And that does represent a kind of lack of integrity. But the "dishonesty" involved is not about lying to others so much as it is a natural outgrowth of the identification with only a part of the self, the moral part, with a concomitant sense that the other part, with the forbidden desire, is the not-I.

So that is the hypocritical part: the failure to embrace the whole truth about the self—that is comprised not only of the "righteous" part but of the "sinner" part as well.

If the moral order of the surrounding society weakens, the person with a moral exo-skeleton is genuinely threatened—not just regarding his conduct, but also even regarding his identity.

*The Dangerous Blindness of Some Moral Endo-Skeletons*

Those of us with the endo-skeleton structure—who can live moral and orderly lives even if we live in an "anything goes" society—can reasonably be tempted to feel superior to those with the exo-skeleton dependency on the moral sanctions of a more straight-and-narrow society.

And indeed there are theories of moral development according to which the internalization of moral order is a more "advanced" form of moral development. But, at this point in our nation's history, we can see that the quest for advanced consciousness has many dimensions, and neither side of America's divide has aced the course. This is part of the cost of our cultural polarization—two forms of moral blindness, very different from each other but also two sides of the same coin.

Just as the cultural right has damaged the United States because of its failure to acknowledge its inner sinner, the left has damaged the nation through its failure to recognize its inner moral structure.

This was one of the greatest shortcomings of the counterculture that arose in the 1960s. We simply tore down a great many of our society's moral structures and assumed that all would be well. We had half-baked theories of human nature, and of society, that justified "letting it all hang out" and "doing our own thing" and "if it feels good, do it."

History has shown that we were naive. Not all has been well. Indeed, I would argue that this naive miscalculation is part of what has led, ultimately, to the rise of the more destructive forces from the right, embodied by the Bush administration.

*Living Off of Our Moral Capital*
What many in the counterculture did, I believe, was to look at themselves in their “liberated” state and imagine that they saw human nature in its pristine condition. But in reality, most of the middle class youth—brought up in the 1940s and ’50s—who comprised the counterculture had already internalized a great many of the disciplines, moral and otherwise, of traditional American culture.

That’s why they could engage in the cultural revolution of liberation and then go on to become effective, middle class, liberal professionals with well-ordered lives.

The loosening of the moral structures of society, the dissipation of our culture’s moral capital has impacted, rather, the heirs of the counterculture—younger people who didn’t form their characters in the tighter environments of the 1940s and ’50s, but in the culturally looser decades since.

Veteran teachers have for a long time now been complaining that each successive wave of students shows signs of a loosening in discipline of various kinds. The culture has grown trashier, the demands of society have become less stringent, the culture of indulgence has grown deeper—and all this has led to a visible cultural decline.

Many of those who carried with them the older structures have managed to raise children whose lives are also fairly well-ordered. But—even there— it is a diminishing cultural capital that we are living off of. And I expect that—among the endo-skeletons, in the absence of some kind of cultural renewal— the necessary forms of moral structure (and other disciplines) will continue to attenuate.

But it is on the other side of the cultural divide—in the realm of the exo-skeletons—that the loosening of the moral order has proved most dangerous.

It isn’t only that the cultural right, more dependent on the external restraints, becomes more likely to succumb to forbidden impulses—like sailors come to port. More dangerous for society is that the particular nature of the right’s moral vision—its relative harshness and its punitiveness—transforms the impulses of the human animal into something darker.

Fragile orders tend also to be harsher—tyranny being seen as the surest means to avoid anarchy. And, accordingly, a moral order that is less internalized, being more fragile, tends also toward harshness.

Thus the morality of the exo-skeletons tends to denigrate the human nature it seeks to control. This morality also tends to be more punitive in its approach to control—glad to invest big sums in a brutal prison system (whether or not such punishments actually serve society best, as with drug offenders), condoning the torture of enemy combatants, passionately committed to the death penalty, and building its worldview around a highly punitive Lord of the Universe.

And the harsher the morality—the more the interaction between cultural demand and human nature is conducted in the form of war—the more the feelings inside the human being turn toward rage (at the wounds inflicted), toward a desire for power (to counteract the
powerlessness of being small in a world that has declared war on you), and toward a lust for vengeance (for all the punishment and rejection inflicted).

The harsh morality of the cultural right thus engenders within the human spirit a kind of wolf. It is a wolf such as Shakespeare described in Troilus and Cressida:

Then every thing includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
And appetite, an universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded with will and power,  
Must make perforce an universal prey,  
And last eat up himself.

And the same harsh morality that goads this wolf into life will also—when it is intact—help confine that beast to its cage.

The loosening of the cage of the nation's social morality had one meaning, therefore, among America's endo-skeletons, but another darker meaning among America's exo-skeletons. It is as though a boat was tipped by the left, but it was the right that got wet. It wasn't just the natural id that was loosed on the cultural right, but also unleashed were those impulses that their sub-culture's harshness had made dark. We in the counterculture who wanted to liberate, for example, the natural sexual energies of the human creature also, unwittingly, weakened the checks on the lust for power, on greed, on self-aggrandizement.

Morality, it turns out, is of a piece. And so is our culture.

And so it could be said the wolf has now broken from its cage. Draped in the national flag, it prowls society from the precincts of power, fooling enough people into thinking that what it's bringing is order.

Reconstructing the Cage

In any event, there are better options for order. But their realization is a significant cultural achievement. Good order in the human realm doesn't happen except through wise and strenuous human effort.

The task then is twofold. It isn't only to remove that wolf from power, but it is also to help reconstruct the cage—those structures of morality—that kept it in check. Ideally, we'd do much better than merely "reconstruct" the moral cage of an earlier era. That would be an improvement over this loosening, which has unleashed these dark forces. But still better would be to find a better means of containment, or perhaps even a more harmonious form of domestication that doesn't need to abuse the creature it brings into the social fold. That old order was far from ideal.

The counter-culture recognized the oppressiveness of the old order, but it failed to realize that a truly beneficent revolution isn't accomplished by the storming of the Bastille. And it
failed to recognize that the movement of a culture to its next, more advanced form is a long-
term and difficult process.

What is needed this time around is not a wanton rejection of the old structures, replacing
them with nothing. As endo-skeletons, we must understand more fully the structures that
hold us together.

We must understand, that is, that the moral endo-skeleton is not nothing. It is something
achieved through human development. And, more, we need to understand that the endo-
skeleton doesn’t come from nothing. It is the internalization of the order the growing human
encounters around him or her.

And no skeleton at all is a recipe for falling apart.

ABOUT AUTHOR Andrew Bard Schmookler’s website, None So Blind, is devoted to
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