



For Such A Time As This **James C. Rahn**

The Jubilee Centre's 10th Anniversary Conference
Oriol College, Oxford
Remarks Delivered 8 September 2022

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues
University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom
T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875
E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

James C. Rahn

The Jubilee Centre's 10th Anniversary Conference

Oriel College, Oxford

Remarks Delivered 8 September 2022

"If you are only working to solve problems you can accomplish in your lifetime, you are solving problems that are too small!" This is among the wise sayings of Mr. Robert Kern for whom I have had the privilege of working over the past fifteen years. My Kern Family Foundation colleagues and I have accepted that challenge, and we are committed to deploying the Foundation's assets toward addressing significant cultural challenges related to the Kern family's priorities. To Mr. Kern's quote I will add my own, "Never trust an investment in moral education that doesn't impact your grandchildren." I would like to talk about that challenge this evening.

I have five grandchildren. Their names are Ian, Evan, Julian, Nora, and Lois. When I think of my grandchildren, it is not philosophical abstractions of neo-Aristotelian moral frameworks that motivate me. Rather it is the faces of my five grandchildren. This summer my wife and I took Ian and Evan, ages 9 and 7 to the Black Hills of South Dakota. It was ten days of intense cross-generational bonding. Their faces animate my thoughts this evening.

Can my lifework create a moral ecology that will positively influence their lives? Here is the challenge I put before you this evening:

What if the successes of our professional careers in character education were measured by the moral formation of our grandchildren?

Are we creating the climate for sufficient moral formation in families, schools, professions, and society to influence them? Are we making a difference in the moral ecology of our nations? These questions haunt me. While we celebrate our past success tonight, the challenges before us are mounting and demand a focused urgency and scrutiny. What are our professional priorities for such a time as this, if such a generational vision animates our collective mission?

This is indeed a time of celebration for the enormous accomplishments of James Arthur and the Jubilee Centre. When the Kern Family Foundation was first introduced to the Jubilee Framework for Character Education and the Jubilee team, we did a full stop... and subsequent pivot in our investments in character. James has over the past decade catalyzed an international network of thought leaders around the concept of character formation and moral development. He has invigorated an academic discussion on a framework of virtues designed to foster the flourishing of individuals and society. Collectively, we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to James, and the entire Jubilee Centre team, as well as to the John Templeton Foundation leadership for their philanthropic vision and investment. The Kern Family Foundation is honored to have played a small role in this academic beachhead in moral education.

However, lasting moral formation is measured in generations not decades—in the ability of one generation to pass on its moral ecology to the next. In this there is much more to be done, and it is something that we are going to have to do together.

Beyond the academy, our work in the moral reformation of society has barely begun. As a sunset foundation, the urgency of time is woven into the DNA of the Kern Family Foundation. Our Foundation will sunset in 2035; thus, we have but thirteen years to determine sustainable, scalable strategies; build strong partnerships; and foster dense networks and a network of networks capable of lasting social change. What are we doing that will significantly influence our grandchildren? There are lessons we can learn from the history that surrounds us here at Oxford University.

Located in the foyer of St. John's College Chapel is the statue of William Wilberforce, the celebrated historic political social reformer. He is known for his efforts in the abolition of slavery, but this was only one of his two life goals. He wrote in his Journal, "God Almighty has set before me two Great Objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners." His second great object parallels what concerns us this evening.

The late 18th and early 19th century world of Wilberforce was a harsh world. The everyday conditions of work, social services, medicine, education, criminal justice, animal care, and, yes, slavery, lacked a collective vision of empathy for the other. It was grotesquely brutish by all contemporary standards. However, what was still in place was a residual Victorian morality to which Wilberforce and his friends in the Clapham Sect regularly appealed. Over the course of the thirty years when the group was active, they became the best model we have for turning around a society and culture. They remain in many circles the paragon example of an effective dense network for social change.

As significant as Wilberforce was to this effort, it was the diverse collaboration of the members of the Clapham Circle that made the difference. The main actor on the stage of lasting cultural change is not the heroic individual but the dense network. Historian John Pollack observed, "Wilberforce's life is proof that a man can change his times, though he cannot do it alone." Likewise, historian Niall Ferguson observes "Often the biggest changes in history are the achievements of thinly documented, informally organized groups of people." There are numerous historical examples of dense networks making significant changes in society to the point of redefining reality: the rise of Christianity, the abolition of slavery, the rise of Russian communism, Jewish admission to elite universities, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Gay Equality movement, among others. In short, dense networks are the way things get done in society. Are those of us in this room a sufficiently dense network to make a lasting difference?

Over the course of the past decade, the Jubilee Centre has curated a nascent network of likeminded scholars and practitioners. It is now time intentionally to thicken the density of this network: both relationally and toward a common vision of moral formation. This tacit network must be galvanized consciously around a compelling vision. Wilberforce was not shy about articulating visions sufficiently robust that they could not be achieved alone or quickly. We need a robust cause that will galvanize and unify our diverse network of networks to making a lasting generational difference. We need a vision that demands ongoing strategic collaboration. And we need catalytic leaders ready to serve a collaborative vision that is larger than their own institution's mission. To achieve the kind of moral ecology that will influence our grandchildren, it will take a greater degree of self-conscious network building joined with a leadership commitment focused on sustained collaboration.

For all the success of the Clapham Circle in achieving the abolition of slavery in 1833, and for all the particular social reform efforts they accomplished toward the reformation of manners in the 19th century, they largely failed in passing on their moral vision and standards to their grandchildren. Their story is a cautionary tale. The grandchildren of the Clapham Sect were the recognized leaders of the Bloomsbury group. They went from morality to amorality. In three generations they went from being the paragons of evangelical social reform to the transgressive champions and critics of everything the Clapham Sect stood for. "Bloomsbury," historian Gertrude Himmelfarb writes, "was as much a group as Clapham was a 'sect.' And it performed something of the same function, setting the tone and agenda for the cultural 'vanguard' of the nation." Here the parallels end as they stood for opposite ethical agendas: one for moral and spiritual reformation and the other for moral and spiritual liberation.

How does one get from Clapham to Bloomsbury?

By car it is a journey of about ten kilometers that would take about twenty-seven minutes. Culturally it took three generations for the moral and spiritual transformation to take root. It is about our grandchildren. Are our efforts in moral reform sufficient to shape the moral ecology of their world, three generations out?

Many thought leaders on morality have observed that we live in a cultural climate where the social expectations have moved from "We" to "I." Long term this will be our civilizational undoing. The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks warns, "If we care for the future of democracy, we must recover that sense of shared morality that binds us to one another in the bond of mutual compassion and care. There is not liberty without morality, no freedom without responsibility, no viable 'I' without the sustainable 'We.'" The reformation of manners is a pressing priority in our own day.

In the United States we have experienced over the past months an epidemic of mass shootings. In this America is exceptional. There is public outcry, political handwringing, and pundit outrage. Blame is placed on a wide array of suspects: guns, mental health, NRA, Republicans, parents, media, and entertainment. Almost never is blame placed on the moral ethos in which these young male perpetrators have been raised—a moral ethos grounded in expressive individualism, social fragmentation, mental depression, inflammatory rhetoric, normalization of violence, and daily drug use. Modern young people are growing up in world without familial stability, uncertain economic prospects, delegitimate public institutions, and a normalization of pop moral nihilism. The results of this moral ecology are not surprising.

One is reminded of British poet Edwin Brock's observation in *Five Ways to Kill a Man*: all it takes to kill a man is to have him grow up in the South Side of Chicago in the twenty-first century. The moral ethos of his surroundings will get him in time. Brock wrote,

In an age of aeroplanes, you may fly
miles above your victim and dispose of him by
pressing one small switch.

All you then require is an ocean to separate you, two
systems of government, a nation's scientists,
several factories, a psychopath and
land that no one needs for several years.

These are, as I began, cumbersome ways to kill a man.
Simpler, direct, and much more neat is to see that he is
living somewhere in the middle of the twentieth-first
century and leave him there.

In England, the moral shift came in the Edwardian era, a period highlighted recently by the television series *Downton Abbey*. Here the trappings of being a gentleman took precedence over the reasons for being a gentleman. The "why" questions were abandoned for the "what" questions. Faith, religion, and metaphysics played almost no part in the rationale of moral life, except as a casual social ritual. The English of the Edwardian era retained a morality that was shaped by religion, without any strict adherence to or conviction of religion. It was a morality without metaphysics. Theirs were values without transcendence, virtue without objectivity, classical appeal without contemporary relevance, and a morality built on philosophical bald tires that lack practical traction under pressure, lacking what sociologists speak of as "binding address." Our movement is in danger of the same tendency.

What history demonstrates is that a cut flower morality dies in the third generation. As a network, we must stand against the naivete of a cut flower moral framework. We must take to heart the warning of sociologist James Davison Hunter, "We want character but without unyielding convictions, we want strong morality but without the emotional burdens of guilt or shame, we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms that we want it." Such thin-gruel morality is not sufficient to the moral task of our moment.

The Clapham reformers failed to address the intellectual currents that were undermining the basis of the moral convictions and faith of their children. They were animated by an evangelical missionary zeal, a pragmatic bias, and an anti-intellectual pietism. They failed to address the encroaching scientism, biblical higher criticism, progressive rationalism, Philistine anti-aesthetic biases, emotional upheaval of the loss of faith, and communal disruptions that shaped the world in which their children were being raised. That the tide of faith was receding, its social plausibility collapsing, and doubts loomed large were all ignored. They continued to champion the what without ever addressing the why. Their cut flower morality inevitably morphed in three generations into the amorality of the Bloomsbury group. Morality without a metaphysical justification is a morality that will evaporate under the hot noon sun.

Novelist Flannery O'Connor decreed that you must "push back against the age as hard as it pushes against you." Discussing the metaphysical basis for morality is politically incorrect in many academic circles today. But if we do not have the courage to debate the deep sources of moral virtues, who will? Is it easier to applaud an ancient taxonomy of virtues in a vacuum? To speak in vague civic generalities without challenging the epistemic basis of expressive individualism and the fact/value dualism that dominates our age and is assumed by most of our educational institutions? History suggests that avoiding these sensitive subjects will not be enough to sustain a binding address in the moral convictions of our grandchildren.

We are raising a generation within a post-Christian Nietzschean world—where the horizon has been wiped away, the stabilizing rituals of family and religion are largely abandoned, where the basics of meaning have evaporated, and the logic of suicide personally omnipresent. Today we are starting from within the assumptions of Bloomsbury. In this world, a bald-tire morality that does not address its moral justification is not enough. We must address the insufficiency of the autonomous self, the inadequacy of subjective values, the limitations of individualism, the insufficiency of mutual consent as moral justification, and the falsehood of morality unmoored from metaphysics. Such efforts demand academic courage, robust civil debate, and comprehensive strategies for shifting the moral tide among our culture shaping institutions.

The Kern Family Foundation has a ticking clock. Like the aging Dowager Countess of Grantham in *Downton Abbey*, we have earned the right to be straightforward. At Kern, we are all in on character education and moral reform in all our social institutions. But for morality to have ethical traction among our grandchildren, we must have the courage to ask "why." We may differ on our ultimate answers, but we must not allow academic threats, English politeness, or religious biases keep us from a robust debate on the sources of the virtues we seek in our institutions, society, and yes, our grandchildren. The successes of our careers in this space are going to be measured by the moral arc of their lives.

We may celebrate our accomplishment in inaugurating a sustained conversation about character education and moral formation. We may applaud the research we have conducted on what constitutes human flourishing. We must now consciously create dense networks and a network of networks around a cause that deepens our conversations about the justification of moral formation. We must have the courage to start with "why."

This will take us into domains where personal vulnerability is required, academic courage needed, and sustained debate welcomed. Our task is to give the coming generations a moral framework that is more than just a cut flower or thin gruel. In their world the basis for morality has been abandoned for some time. Platitudes and taxonomies are not going to be sufficiently convincing. We need the collective courage to say what is moral and why. This is the generational task for such a time as this.

Mr. Kern is correct, "If you are only working to solve problems you can accomplish in your lifetime, you are solving problems that are too small."

Ian, Evan, Julian, Norah, Lois – and all of your grandchildren – are counting on us!