

Common character: The connection between personal and social ethics

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A judging scandal at the Olympic ice-skating rink may have seemed to many little more than an entertaining diversion in a season of terrorism and recession. But there was an important moral issue behind the story of alleged collusion. When Marie Reine Le Gougne indicated to her fellow judges that she had been pressured to favor the Russian skaters over the Canadians, she illustrated to what extent the sport as a whole rests upon the honesty of individuals. Any enterprise that involves judgment, in which decisions cannot be determined by the objective results of a clock or a measurement, will stand or fall with the integrity of its officials.

If the state of figure skating seems like a trivial matter, we have the Enron-Andersen debacle to consider. Though perhaps no laws were broken in this financial meltdown, it's clear that individuals in positions of authority abrogated their moral responsibility to follow the spirit of the laws, to make responsible decisions, and to tell the truth. There may be flaws in the regulatory system that allowed Enron's collapse, but the agents of collapse were all people who, at different points along the road, could have chosen otherwise.

Meanwhile, the consequences of those personal and individual decisions at Enron are systemic. Thousands have lost jobs, savings and investments; key corporate and financial institutions have been undermined; and confidence has been shaken in how America does business.

Both cases demonstrate how fuzzy the distinction is between personal and social ethics. In current debates, it's often assumed, if not explicitly argued, that if you care about character, you're not concerned about the big social-political issues, and if you care about large-scale social-political issues, then you must regard questions of personal virtue as a minor, bourgeois matter.

Such a distinction was meaningless to the prophet Amos. He could pronounce doom on Israel for turning away from God, but his focus on the "system" didn't prevent

him from pointing out that someone had his finger on the scale. Amos's judgment against Israel was inseparable from his judgment against choices being made by Israelites. For Amos, the system could not work if integrity had been thrown to the ground.

The seemingly casual regard for the connection between personal integrity and the common good is what's so troubling about a Kansas school board's recent move to overturn a teacher's decision to deal severely with plagiarism in her sophomore class. In the world of education, plagiarism is a Class One felony that combines the vices of theft and lying. A student who plagiarizes steals the work of another and deceitfully claims it for himself. A school board that minimizes the significance of such behavior is missing a chance to build individual integrity—the kind of integrity that eventually has a wider social impact.

Concern for the common good—of a small group of ice skating enthusiasts or of a society as diverse as the U.S.—will always involve concern for character. No system can be so cleverly devised that it does not depend upon the moral action of individuals.