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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Commencement Speech Morality

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Abstract

We are never more high-minded about what matters in life than when we are at commencement ceremonies. As new graduates prepare to head into the real world, speakers tell them that to live meaningful lives they need to get out there and make their mark: change the world, upset the status quo, solve the biggest problems, and shape the revolutions of our time. But is this good life advice? Not really. Commencement Speech Morality encourages young people to become moralizers and busybodies. We should be wary of preaching it.

Keywords: activism; commencement speeches; effective altruism; moralizing; busybodies

"Let us make a name for ourselves."
—Genesis 11:4

Commencement

Each year, millions of college graduates in the United States and around the world convene for a ritual that is at once celebration, valediction, and exhortation. For two hours, these graduating students, their families, and members of the university apparatus gather to congratulate, laugh, reminisce, applaud, hoot, and holler.

My topic is the centerpiece of these ceremonies: the commencement speech, a fifteen-minute address meant to humor and inspire. Schools that can afford it shell out big bucks to bring in celebrities to give these talks, some of whom command well over $100,000.[1] Actors, musicians, journalists, scientists, novelists, chief executive officers (CEOs), astronauts, politicians, entrepreneurs, and

[1] The University of Texas paid actor Matthew McConaughey $135,000 in 2015. Journalist Katie Couric got $110,000 from the University of Oklahoma in 2006. Jake New, "$135,000 for Commencement Speech?" *Inside Higher Ed*, April 1, 2015, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/02/matthew-mcconaugheys-pricey-commencement-speaker-fee-not-out-norm.

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U.S. Supreme Court justices are popular choices.[2] Lesser schools invite alumni, community leaders, and local businesspeople, who are compensated with an honorary degree. Hardly a year passes when the choice of commencement speaker does not become a battlefront in the culture wars.[3] Sometimes graduates choose to protest, walking out on a speaker they find distasteful.[4] Every graduation season a new crop of high-profile speeches is excerpted and published by the press. Some are turned into books that grace best-seller lists.

Commencement speeches serve a specific social function. As Markella Rutherford observes, these messages communicate to young people the expectations for being a productive and "good" member of society.[5] Those who currently occupy positions of prestige reveal to the aspiring elite the path to happiness and success.[6] The commencement speaker functions as social sherpa and sage, shaping and guiding the aspirations of young people so that their lives can have meaning and purpose.

One noteworthy feature of commencement speeches is that they devote so much time to moral messaging. On the one hand, this might seem odd. There's nothing about the commencement event itself that requires a fifteen-minute moral lesson. Commencement speakers could instead tell jokes or entertain by sharing some interesting knowledge about the world (and many speakers do opt for one of these alternative routes). On the other hand, as valediction, it is understandable that commencement speeches are expected to offer a parting moral lesson as students begin the next stage of their lives. Moral messaging in commencement speeches is not uncommon. It is not a recent development, either. For over a century, speakers have been telling students how to live.[7]

[2] According to one study, the three most common commencement speaker occupations are government or legal professionals; journalists or nonfiction writers; and artists, creative writers, or entertainers. See Jenifer J. Partch and Richard T. Kinnier, "Values and Messages Conveyed in College Commencement Speeches," *Current Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2011): 86.

[3] The American Right and Left both participate in the commencement speech wars. In 2009, University of Notre Dame students protested President Obama's commencement speech over his support of abortion. Eight years later, Notre Dame students again protested when it was Vice President Mike Pence's turn.

[4] Colorado College graduates in 2023 sat with their backs facing U.S. Representative and college alumnus Liz Cheney. O'Dell Isaac, "Colorado College Alum Liz Cheney Delivers Commencement Speech; Graduates Turn Chairs Away from Stage in Protest," *The Denver Gazette*, May 28, 2023, https://gazette.com/news/education/colorado-college-alum-liz-cheney-delivers-commencement-speech-graduates-turn-chairs-away-from-stage-in/article_32e7fc22-fd89-11ed-92a8-f7214a714b08.html. Approximately 100 students walked out during Mike Pence's 2017 Notre Dame speech. Sabrina Rojas Weiss, "100 Notre Dame Students Walk Out during VP Mike Pence's Commencement Address," *Refinery29*, May 21, 2017, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2017/05/155457/notre-dame-commencement-walk-out-mike-pence.

[5] Markella B. Rutherford, "Authority, Autonomy, and Ambivalence: Moral Choice in Twentieth-Century Commencement Speeches," *Sociological Forum* 19, no. 4 (2004): 587.

[6] Rutherford, "Authority, Autonomy, and Ambivalence," 587.

[7] Rutherford, "Authority, Autonomy, and Ambivalence," 595.

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Taken as a whole, modern commencement speeches present a collection of moral messages that express a shared moral outlook. I call this shared outlook Commencement Speech Morality. "One of the central tasks of the moral philosopher," writes Alasdair MacIntyre, "is to articulate the convictions of the society in which he or she lives so that these convictions may become available for rational scrutiny."[8] In this essay, I take up these two projects with respect to the phenomena of commencement speeches. First, I articulate the convictions of Commencement Speech Morality. Then, I will scrutinize them.

Commencement speech morality

The main ideas of Commencement Speech Morality are difficult to state precisely, but if it were distilled into its most basic elements, it would say something like this:

> The world is full of injustices that need to be addressed and people who need help. It is clear what needs to be done, but too many people do not care enough to do it. But you care. So, get out there and make a name for yourself, solve the biggest problems you can find, and make the world a better place for everyone.

If you have attended graduation ceremonies or read about them in the news, this genre of moral exhortation will be familiar. I will explore what I take to be the five primary ideas of Commencement Speech Morality, but first, I offer some clarifications.

Although Commencement Speech Morality finds its clearest expressions from behind the podium, you will encounter it in many other cultural contexts: marketing materials for humanitarian organizations, high school guidance counselors and hopeful parents, and corporate branding used to lure young and eager employees.

I do not mean to suggest that every commencement speech presents the same set of moral messages or that the content of these messages has not changed over time.[9] Not every country music song talks about trucks, dogs, guns, breakups, and beer. But enough of them do for the genre to warrant the reputation. So it is with commencement speeches and their shared moral outlook.

I call Commencement Speech Morality a "moral outlook" because it defies more traditional categorization. For starters, it does not present a normative moral theory. Normative moral theories tell us which actions are morally right and wrong or which traits of character are morally good and bad, and why this is so. Although Commencement Speech Morality does give moral advice to young

[8] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism a Virtue?" in *Military Ethics*, ed. C. A. J. Coady and Igor Primoratz (2008; repr., Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 187.

[9] In fact, there is evidence that the content of these moral messages has changed over time. Rutherford, "Authority, Autonomy, and Ambivalence," 583, analyzed 171 commencement speeches from 1900–2000, concluding that "the rhetoric of choice becomes more prevalent and increasingly individualistic during the twentieth century" and that "the rhetoric of moral choice is found to increasingly emphasize subjective moral autonomy rather than objective moral authority."

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people about how to live their lives, it is not so general for it to count as a theory of moral right and wrong. Commencement speeches do not try to settle debates between act- and rule-utilitarians, for example, and they do not present a detailed enough theory of the good or the right for us to know under what conditions abortion is morally permissible.[10]

Nor does Commencement Speech Morality offer a theory of social morality. Theories of social morality tell us how we are morally permitted or required to promote or enforce morality, and why this is so. Sometimes, moral enforcement involves publicly blaming, criticizing, ostracizing, or shaming people for certain behaviors, but it can also include publicly praising, platforming, and rewarding people for what they do. Commencement speeches obviously do not present anything like a general theory of social morality. But as we will see they do commonly encourage young people to identify moral problems in the world and solve them.

Commencement Speech Morality is not a theory of political morality either. A theory of political morality tells us what kinds of political arrangements make a society or its citizens good. It answers questions like: How much democracy should we have? How should we think about immigration? But commencement speeches do nothing like offer a comprehensive theory of political morality even though they do often communicate certain political judgments that graduates are expected to share: that democracy is good and more of it is better, that it is important to vote for politicians who share your values, that you have a responsibility to protest and stand up for what you believe in, and so on.

Commencement Speech Morality is an "outlook" in that it is a complex and not easily articulated *set of values, priorities, obligations*, and *judgments* that provides young people with a certain kind of life orientation. It preaches both a way of seeing the world and a way of living in it. I propose that Commencement Speech Morality has five central ideas.

Moral life is simple

Commencement Speech Morality presents morality as something simple and easy to grasp. The simplicity and transparency of morality take many forms. Sometimes, the idea is that the world is Manichaean, a battleground between the forces of goodness and justice, on the one hand, and evil and injustice, on the other. There is a clearly recognizable Good Side that supports the Good Things and a similarly recognizable Bad Side that supports the Bad Things. Actor Tom Hanks clearly drew the battle lines in his 2023 speech at Harvard University: "We

[10] This is not to say that commencement speakers do not often make pronouncements about specific moral issues. In his 2023 commencement address at Howard University, President Joe Biden stated his commitment to "protect fundamental rights and freedoms for women to choose and for transgender children to be free," which was greeted with applause. "Remarks by President Biden at the Howard University Class of 2023 Commencement Address," The White House, May 13, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/05/13/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-howard-university-class-of-2023-commencement-address/.

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are all in a cage match, mixed martial arts battle royale with agents of intolerance and braying incompetence, the malevolent equals to Imperial stormtroopers, Lex Luthor, and Loki. And we could use a superhero right now."[11] Perhaps not unsurprisingly, commencement speakers often suggest that in this Manichaean battle, the graduates uniformly belong to the Good Side and only want the Good Things and will soon need to fight the sinister forces that await them outside the ivy walls. President Joe Biden told Howard University graduates in 2023:

> Again, let's be clear: There are those who don't see you and don't want this future. There are those who demonize and pit people against one another. And there are those who do anything and everything, no matter how desperate or immoral, to hold onto power. And that's never going to be an easy battle. But I know this: The oldest, most sinister forces may believe they'll determine America's future, but they are wrong. We will determine America's future. You will determine America's future. And that's not hyperbole.[12]

The simplicity of moral life can also take the form of a claim that the important moral and political issues of our time are not complicated. All that is needed are young bright people of good will to finally do what is right. Whatever the specific form of the claim, Commencement Speech Morality betrays a very high confidence in its moral judgments: about who is morally good and bad, about what is right or wrong in the world, about our ability to solve big moral problems, and about what ought to be done about them.

To get a better feel for this feature of Commencement Speech Morality, here are some messages discordant with it, ones unlikely to appear in commencement speeches:

- "Many of our most pressing moral and political problems are incredibly complex and difficult to understand."
- "Some problems in the world may not have any solutions at all. We may just have to live with them."
- "The world is full of trade-offs, so be prepared to sacrifice some things you care about to get other things you care about."

[11] Alvin Powell, "Tom Hanks Sends Off Class of 2023," *The Harvard Gazette*, May 25, 2023, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2023/05/actor-tom-hanks-sends-off-harvards-class-of-2023/.

[12] "Remarks by President Biden at the Howard University Class of 2023 Commencement Address." Relatedly, speakers often assume that everyone in attendance shares their politics. In 2015, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie told Wellesley College graduates, "You are ridiculously lucky to be graduating from this bastion of excellence and on these beautiful acres. And if the goddesses and gods of the universe do the right thing, then you will also very soon be the proud alumnae of the college that produced America's first female president! Go Hillary!" Who at Wellesley could possibly disagree? Wellesley College Commencement Address Archive, 2015, https://www.wellesley.edu/events/commencement/archives/2015/commencementaddress.

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- "Morally speaking, humans are a mixed bag—few of us are very good or very bad and most of us are just mediocre."
- "The odds that you are right about all or even most of your moral and political beliefs are low. So proceed accordingly."

The world is your business

In Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, miserly Ebenezer Scrooge is asked to donate money to the poor. "It's enough for a man to understand his own business and not to interfere with other people's," Scrooge snaps. "Mine occupies me constantly." Later in the story, Scrooge is visited by his former business partner Jacob Marley, who, though he once shared Scrooge's outlook in life, has in death returned to tell a tale of regret. "Mankind was my business," bemoans Marley. "The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"[13]

Commencement Speech Morality takes Marley's side in this dispute, communicating to young people that the world—all of it—is their business. Graduates are encouraged to view the world as a place of injustice and suffering and they are told that it is *their responsibility to set things right.* The world's ills are presented as a buffet of options. Upon graduation, the young person stands before this buffet and decides how he will make his life meaningful. Actor Matt Damon addressed graduates at Massachusetts Institute of Technology:

> You've got to go out and do really interesting things, important things, inventive things, because this world, real or imagined, this world has some problems that we need you to drop everything and solve. Go ahead: take your pick from the world's worst buffet. Economic inequality, that's a problem. Or how about the refugee crisis, massive global insecurity, climate change, pandemics, institutional racism, a pull to nativism, fear-driven brains working overtime, here in America and in places like Austria, where a far-right candidate nearly won the presidential election for the first time since World War II.[14]

It is not just national or global problems that are on the buffet, either. In a democracy, every political event is your business. Michelle Obama told Oberlin College graduates: "Every city ordinance, every ballot measure, every law on the books in this country—that is your concern. What happens at every school-board meeting, every legislative session—that is your concern. Every elected official who represents you, from dog catcher all the way to President of the

[13] Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46/46-h/46-h.htm. For more on Scrooge, see Gerald Gaus, "On the Difficult Virtue of Minding One's Own Business: Towards the Political Rehabilitation of Ebenezer Scrooge," *The Philosopher: A Magazine for Free Spirits* 5 (1997): 24–28.

[14] "Matt Damon's Commencement Address," *MIT News*, June 3, 2016, https://news.mit.edu/2016/matt-damon-commencement-address-0603.

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United States—they are your concern."[15] Doing a little bit is not enough, either. You must be all in, she explained:

> You see, it's wonderful to volunteer at your local homeless shelter—please do that—but you also need to attend the city council meetings and make sure the zoning laws don't shut that shelter down. Are you thinking of teaching in an under-served school? If so, I'm glad to hear that. So many kids need you. But you've also got to elect good people to your school board and state legislature, because they decide whether you have the resources you need to inspire and empower your students. Are you planning to rally for marriage equality on the steps of the Supreme Court? I certainly hope so. But I also hope you will knock on doors and make some calls to elect a President who shares your values. Because that President will ultimately choose the justices who decide those cases in the first place. And finally, while peaceful protest can be powerful, if we truly want to reform our criminal justice system, then we need to come together and do the hard work of changing our laws and policies to reflect our values.[16]

According to the commencement speech moralist, Pericles had it right: "[W]e do not say that a man who has no interest in politics minds his own business, we say he has no business here at all."[17] For the commencement speech moralist, the world's problems are your problems.

Solving problems is primary

There are presumably many ways to live a good life and do good in the world. Commencement Speech Morality promotes a certain approach to doing good, however, one devoted to what we might crudely call "solving problems." Specifically, Commencement Speech Morality encourages young people to right the wrongs they have identified in the world: reduce inequality, eliminate poverty, campaign for the "right" politicians, make sure they pass the "right" laws. Tech billionaire Hayes Barnard captured the problem-solving ethos of Commencement Speech Morality when he told graduates at the University of Texas, Austin, "You're better equipped than any class in history to solve humanity's biggest problems and we need you to show us the way."[18]

One common way of expressing to young people the imperative to solve problems is in terms of *helping people.* "The good news is, you are graduating at a time of immense opportunity to help people," Bill Gates told Harvard graduates.

[15] "Remarks by the First Lady at Oberlin College Commencement Address," The White House, May 25, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/25/remarks-first-lady-oberlin-college-commencement-address.

[16] "Remarks by the First Lady at Oberlin College Commencement Address."

[17] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Classics, 1972), para. 2.40.

[18] "Hayes Barnard Delivers Commencement Address," *UT News*, May 6, 2023, https://news.utexas.edu/2023/05/06/hayes-barnard-delivers-commencement-address-at-the-university-of-texas-at-austin/.

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"New industries and companies are emerging every day that will allow you to make a living by making a difference. And advances in science and technology have made it easier than ever to make a big impact."[19] (You may notice a continuing emphasis on doing "big" things. More on that below.) Patricia McGuire, President of Trinity Washington University, told Wells College graduates, "You must never be silent when evidence of injustice cries out for an advocate, a voice, a champion."[20] The notion that a good college graduate might check out of political involvement and devote themselves to other productive endeavors is foreign to Commencement Speech Morality.[21]

According to some speakers, the measure of a life is how successful you have been at solving global problems. Bill Gates (a very popular choice of speaker) told 2007 Harvard grads, "I hope you will judge yourselves not on your professional accomplishments alone, but also on how well you have addressed the world's deepest inequities."[22]

These imperatives to help others are not isolated events. According to a 2011 analysis of ninety commencement speeches, the most common moral message was some form of "help others."[23] According to Commencement Speech Morality, a morally good life is mainly about being useful to others and solving problems.

Here are some kinds of lives ruled out by Commencement Speech Morality or, if not ruled out, implied as being somehow suboptimal:

- A *scholarly life* devoted to learning and the preservation and production of knowledge
- An *artistic life* devoted to creating beautiful things
- An *ascetic life* devoted to self-discipline, growth in virtue, or spiritual enlightenment
- An *entrepreneurial life* devoted to creating products or services
- A *domestic life* devoted to creating a good home, raising children, and enjoying friends and family in hospitality
- A *workaday life* devoted to productive manual labor

Bigger is better

Commencement Speech Morality tells young people to prefer the big to the small. Sometimes, this is just a generic exhortation, as when television anchor

[19] Susan H. Greenberg, "Advice for the Class of 2023," *Inside Higher Ed*, May 24, 2023, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/2023/05/24/advice-class-2023.

[20] See Partch and Kinnier, "Values and Messages Conveyed in College Commencement Speeches," 87.

[21] For a defense of checking out of politics, see Christopher Freiman, *Why It's OK to Ignore Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[22] "Remarks of Bill Gates, Harvard Commencement," *The Harvard Gazette*, June 7, 2007, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2007/06/remarks-of-bill-gates-harvard-commencement-2007/.

[23] Sixty-four percent of speeches analyzed were found to have such moral messaging, including phrases like "give back," "serve humanity," and "make the world a better place." See Partch and Kinnier, "Values and Messages Conveyed in College Commencement Speeches," 86–87.

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Savannah Sellers told University of Colorado, Boulder graduates to "go out and do big things. I can't wait to watch."[24]

Other times, this advice takes the more specific form of recommending that graduates enter public life and garner attention for themselves. Journalist Katie Couric told graduates at the University of Wisconsin, Madison that "you got to get out there and get yourself noticed."[25]

Novelist Salman Rushdie admonished 2015 Emory grads not just to be larger than life and change the world, but to reinvent it: "Try not to be small. Try to be larger than life… . Make no mistake. You can change things. Don't believe anyone who tells you that you can't… . Reinvent the world."[26]

Sometimes, young people are told their lives will have more purpose if they tackle big problems. Bill Gates told 2007 Harvard graduates, "Don't let complexity stop you. Be activists. Take on big inequities. I feel sure it will be one of the great experiences of your lives."[27] Gates reiterated this advice when he addressed Harvard graduates again in 2023, saying that "when you spend your days doing something that solves a big problem, it energizes you to do your best work. It forces you to be more creative, and it gives your life a stronger sense of purpose."[28]

Commencement Speech Morality says be big and bold and, if you err, do so on the side of audacity rather than caution. "Go make your big beautiful dent, and as you do so come down on the side of boldness," explained novelist Sue Monk Kidd to Scripps College graduates. "If you err, may it be for too much audacity, and not too little. For you really are enough. You have untold strengths and resources inside. You have your glorious self."[29]

Good intentions make all the difference

Commencement speakers tell young people that they need to get out there and solve big problems. Do they also tell graduates to remember that lots of smart and well-meaning people are already out there trying their best to solve those problems? That they should take their time and truly understand the complex problems of the world? That it's very easy to destroy good but imperfect things in the world even if our hearts are in the right place?

[24] "2019 Commencement," University of Colorado, Boulder, https://www.colorado.edu/commencement/past-ceremonies/2019-commencement.

[25] Meena Jang, "Katie Couric Offers Career Advice to University of Wisconsin-Madison Grads," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 16, 2015, https://time.com/collection-post/3882654/katie-couric-graduation-speech-2015/.

[26] "2015 Commencement Keynote Address by Salman Rushdie," Emory University YouTube, May 12, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGTtNlwyxIU.

[27] "To Turn Caring into Action," *Harvard Magazine*, June 7, 2007, https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2007/06/bill-gates-harvard-commencement-address.

[28] Ashton Jackson, "Bill Gates: 'Here Are the 5 Things I Wish I Was Told,'" *CNBC*, May 13, 2023, https://www.cnbc.com/2023/05/13/bill-gates-commencement-speech-what-he-wishes-he-knew-in-his-20s.html.

[29] Sue Monk Kidd, "Commencement Speeches," Scripps College, May 16, 2010, https://www.scrippscollege.edu/commencement/speeches/sue-monk-kidd.

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No. Commencement Speech Morality does not tell young people these things. Rather, they are told that the world is full of injustice and that what is missing is *them.* Professor and activist Angela Davis concluded her speech to the Bryn Mawr Class of 2018 by encouraging graduates to say of themselves, "We are the ones we have been waiting for."[30] Graduates bring to the table their values, their character, their desire to do good and change the world for the better. In short, Commencement Speech Morality says that your good intentions will make all the difference in securing a world where our big pressing problems can be solved.

Sometimes, speakers couple this idea with a similar one: that the people who now occupy positions of power and have all the resources they need to solve problems have not succeeded because their hearts are just not in the right place. We failed. But you are different. On the topic of climate change, for example, Apple CEO Tim Cook told Tulane University graduates, "In some important ways, my generation has failed you in this regard. We spent too much time debating. We've been too focused on the fight and not focused enough on progress."[31] In a virtual address to several historically black colleges and universities, President Barack Obama told graduates, "All those adults that you used to think were in charge and knew what they were doing? Turns out that they don't have all the answers. A lot of them aren't even asking the right questions. So, if the world's going to get better, it's going to be up to you."[32]

Sometimes, what has been missing is framed in terms of "political will": the currently powerful lack it, but you graduates have it. In 2019, Hillary Clinton told Hunter College graduates, "Most of them [today's leaders] know what needs to be done, they just lack the political will to do it."[33] In 2005, before he became President, Barack Obama said at Knox College, "We have the talent and the resources and brainpower. But now we need the political will."[34] Eight years later at Ohio State University, he told graduates, "But more than anything, what we will need is political will—to harness the ingenuity of your generation, and encourage and inspire the hard work of dedicated citizens."[35]

[30] This quoted line is, as Davis notes, borrowed from June Jordan's "Poem for South African Women." "The Ones We Have Been Waiting For," *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin*, Summer 2018, https://www.brynmawr.edu/bulletin/ones-we-have-been-waiting.

[31] Megan Henney, "Apple CEO Tim Cook Tells 2019 Graduating Class 'My Generation Has Failed You'," *FOX Business*, May 18, 2019, https://www.foxbusiness.com/business-leaders/apple-ceo-tim-cook-tells-2019-graduating-class-my-generation-has-failed-you.

[32] Conor Roche, "Barack Obama, during Commencement Speeches, Criticized the Leadership Amid the Pandemic," Boston.com, May 16, 2020, https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2020/05/16/barack-obama-coronavirus-hbcu-commencement-speech/.

[33] "Commencement Address at Hunter College," Iowa State University Archives of Women's Communication, May 29, 2019, https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2019/09/23/commencement-address-at-hunter-college-may-29-2019/.

[34] "Barack Obama: Commencement Address at Knox College," American Rhetoric, June 4, 2005, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobamaknoxcollege.htm.

[35] "Remarks by the President at The Ohio State University Commencement," The White House, May 5, 2013, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/05/remarks-president-ohio-state-university-commencement.

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The important point here is that, according to Commencement Speech Morality, past failures are largely attributable to a lack of good intentions and, furthermore, that graduates *do* have the right stuff and are therefore the key to unlocking solutions to a whole host of big complex problems. The key is in their hearts. Business executive and philanthropist Frank McCourt told Georgetown University graduates, "More than your intellect or your acquired skills, I have faith in the size of your heart. In your capacity to meet our moment not only with your proficiency but with your magnanimity. You have the chance to navigate a new path that is not determined by the power of technology but rather is guided by the aspirations of your soul."[36]

If we were to develop further the details of Commencement Speech Morality, we would want to be more specific about how the lack of good intentions explains past failures and how they are supposed to make a difference in the future. The speeches themselves, of course, give us nothing like a theory of the efficacy of good intentions.

One view says that, assuming the right people are given the requisite resources, good intentions are sufficient to fix the world. Those currently in a position to bring about good outcomes just do not mean well enough or there just are not enough well-intentioned people in power. If we could just supply the pure of heart with the right resources, things would get better. With enough of them, some problems will be solved entirely. People who mean well are the difference-maker.

Another approach says that resources, skill, and good intentions do not *guarantee* we solve our problems, but you surely will not do so without them. Meaning well is therefore a necessary condition. Our hearts must be in the right place. Good things will not happen accidently. If we do not aim directly at solving problems, we are doomed to failure. Here, the Commencement Speech Moralist echoes John Rawls, who wrote that "it seems safe to assume that if a regime does not try to realize certain political values [like fair equality of opportunity], it will not in fact do so."[37]

A more modest approach to good intentions says that meaning well increases the likelihood of accomplishing your goals. The old guard did not mean well or well enough, and so the cards were stacked against them. But you young people, armed with your good intentions, have much better prospects at saving the world and it is those good intentions themselves that raise your chances at success.

These, then, are the five key ideas of Commencement Speech Morality: *moral life is simple*, *the world is your business*, *solving problems is primary*, *bigger is better*, and *good intentions make all the difference.* Naturally, we might add others, such as having an unbridled optimism about the future or that moral and social progress is inevitable. While I do think these five ideas constitute the core of Commencement Speech Morality, I am perfectly happy to revise the list.

[36] "14 Best Pieces of Advice from Georgetown's Graduation Speeches," Georgetown University, May 24, 2023, https://www.georgetown.edu/news/14-pieces-of-the-best-advice-from-georgetowns-graduation-speeches/.

[37] John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin I. Kelly, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 137.

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Not all commencement speeches will express all five of these ideas. Yet there is a set of commencement speeches that share what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls a "family resemblance," which is "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing."[38] The more that a particular commencement speech preaches these five ideas, the more it is an expression of Commencement Speech Morality.

Notice that this set of claims that I have collectively called Commencement Speech Morality is not in principle tied to any specific political or ideological group. Republicans and Democrats, for example, can in their own way adopt a version of Commencement Speech Morality. Similarly, conservatives, liberals, socialists, and progressives can each take up this moral outlook in service to their moral, social, and political goals.[39] It may turn out that for one reason or another Commencement Speech Morality is more prevalent among some political or ideological camps at any given point in time. But that is an empirical question we need not pursue here. I emphasize this point because it is important to see that a criticism of Commencement Speech Morality is not thereby an attack on any political group.

So far, I have tried to articulate the convictions of a moral outlook I have called Commencement Speech Morality. Let's now evaluate it.

Costs

There are several ways one might go about assessing Commencement Speech Morality. For example, one might argue that some or all of its key claims are false: moral life is *not* simple, the world's problems are *not* your business, good intentions often have *very little* to do with good outcomes, and so on. While I do think all its key claims are false or at least misleading, I will not argue that here. Instead, I want to focus on this question: What is likely to happen when young people adopt this moral outlook and make life choices guided by it?

On the plus side, many college graduates will imbibe Commencement Speech Morality and do genuinely great things with their lives. Some would have done so even if they had never been told to get out there and solve the world's big problems. Others will find these moral messages energizing and consequently devote themselves to lives of activism or political involvement.

My focus here will not be on the merits of Commencement Speech Morality. There are many voices already advocating such a way of life. Here, I draw attention to the dark side of Commencement Speech Morality. Commencement Speech Morality creates social costs that are unappreciated by both its preachers and practitioners. In short, it promotes three forms of behavior that are bad for society: moralizing, meddling, and maintainer derogation.

[38] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 32.

[39] It is a separate question whether there is anything about, say, conservatism as a political philosophy that would rule out any of these features of Commencement Speech Morality. The claim here is just that a self-identifying conservative (or liberal or...) could become a Commencement Speech Moralist.

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Moralizing

To moralize is to exceed the proper limits of your authority to enforce morality.[40] Moralizers overstep important boundaries as they try to get other people to live the right way (or at least the right way as they see it). To better understand moralizing and how it connects to Commencement Speech Morality, though, we need to step back.

Most people agree that morality is important. It is generally good to tell the truth, keep your promises, be kind to others, make amends when we wrong them, deal fairly, improve ourselves, and be grateful to those who help us. Many will also agree that it is valuable for those of us who participate in the moral community to enforce morality, that is, we try to get people to do what is morally right and to eschew what is morally wrong. We enforce morality in all kinds of ways, most of which involve some kind of intervention into what other people are doing. Sometimes we intervene to encourage someone to do the right thing, give advice about how to handle a situation, or to alert others to moral causes that need attention. Other times, our interventions take a more negative stance. We might criticize someone or his behavior, shame him, or demand that he do better.

Moral enforcement itself is costly; it takes time and energy to intervene in others' affairs, it interrupts what people are doing, it often causes further conflict, and the mere act of coercing others to try to get them to behave differently is a kind of cost. But when all goes well, moral enforcement, costly as it is, is worth it. Moral enforcement must be kept within appropriate limits, however; otherwise, social life would be unbearable. Imagine constantly policing everyone's behavior, thoughts, and character—and having yours policed in turn. We would fill our days with hectoring, pestering, and interpersonal conflict.[41] This would be so even if everyone had true moral beliefs and enforced only the correct morality, which of course is not the case.

I do not have a simple and straightforward theory of the limits of moral enforcement. I am skeptical of any philosopher who proposes one, so I will briefly consider three kinds of limits.

Importance: Even if something is morally wrong, sometimes it is not important enough to justify your intervention. You overhear someone on a phone call at the park lying about their present whereabouts. There is just not sufficient reason for you to intervene even though you know wrong has been done.

Knowledge: Sometimes, we do not know enough about a situation to justify intervention. We are not aware of the nuances of a particular relationship, the motivations, or the histories of the people involved. Other times, we

[40] Justin Tosi and I articulate this account of moralizing in Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, *Why It's OK to Mind Your Own Business* (New York: Routledge, 2023). See also, Julia Driver, "Moralism," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2005): 137–51; Robert K. Fullinwider, "On Moralism," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2005): 105–20.

[41] Thomas Nagel, "Concealment and Exposure," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27, no. 1 (1998): 3–30.

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might know enough about the facts on the ground, but the moral considerations at issue are too complex or unclear to warrant inserting ourselves into others' lives.

Standing: We often lack the appropriate standing to enforce morality in particular situations. Sometimes, this is due to hypocrisy on the part of the would-be moral enforcer. A chain-smoker with no intention of giving up his bad habit does not have the right to lecture people about the harm they are doing to themselves and others by smoking.[42] Other times, we lack the proper social role. It is one thing for your doctor to give you a moral lecture about cleaning up your diet while in the exam room. It is another thing for a stranger to give you the same lecture on the bus, even if it is good advice and even if he is also a doctor.[43]

The general point is that our right to enforce morality is limited. To exceed those limits is, as I have suggested, to moralize. The moralizer makes a mistake in acting as the moral police when he ought instead to keep to himself.

Moralizing has significant social costs, two of which are relevant for our purposes. First, moralizing often interferes with practical discussions. Rather than investigate complicated issues about how the world works or what institutional barriers there might be to realizing their moral vision, many moralizers cut right to the chase and tell us what justice demands. Their inquiry into the way the world works is thus limited to what Robert Nozick cheekily calls "normative sociology," "the study of what the causes of problems ought to be."[44] Moralizers overstep their role as promoters of morality by treating their simple moral claims or slogans as if they settle the matter when things are more complicated. They promote morality too aggressively without paying attention to the facts on the ground. Consequently, moralizers often use morality as a premature conversation-stopper. One U.S. politician illustrates this way of thinking when she expresses her dismay that "there's a lot of people more concerned about being precisely, factually, and semantically correct than about being morally right."[45]

Another social cost of moralizing is that it undermines the efficacy of *appropriate* moral enforcement. We do not automatically make the world better by being a more relentless or aggressive enforcer of morality, even if you only ever enforce the one true morality. If moral enforcement is to retain its power, it must be used sparingly and appropriately. The more we moralize, the more we

[42] On hypocrisy and standing to blame, see Kyle G. Fritz and Daniel J. Miller, "The Unique Badness of Hypocritical Blame," *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 19 (2019): 545–69, https://philpapers.org/archive/FRITUB.pdf; Kyle G. Fritz and Daniel Miller, "Hypocrisy and the Standing to Blame," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (2018): 118–39.

[43] On the importance of social role in enforcing morality, see Fullinwider, "On Moralism."

[44] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 247.

[45] Aaron Blake, "Alexandria Ocasio Cortez's Very Bad Defense of Her Falsehoods," *The Washington Post*, January 7, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/07/alexandria-ocasio-cortezs-very-bad-defense-her-falsehoods/.

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undermine the utility of moral enforcement. Targets of our moral criticism will ignore us, become cynical about morality altogether, or simply respond to our criticism with some of their own.

We can now see why Commencement Speech Morality promotes moralizing. Consider the perspective of someone who sees the world as a receptacle of injustices to set right. Suppose she also thinks that moral life is simple and transparent, that the world's problems are her responsibility to solve, and that her good intentions are the missing ingredient to making the world a better place. What should we expect?

I propose that such a person will tend to become an overconfident enforcer of morality: a moralizer. She will find it easy to discover faults in others and she will find it difficult to mind her own business. Because she is rewarded for unearthing injustices and has been told the world is waiting for *her* to show up at the buffet to identify and solve its biggest problems, she will often be mistaken when she condemns people and their behavior. She does not worry that it is not her place to intervene, because she thinks the world is an ocean of her business. And because she thinks her good intentions are a reliable indicator that she is doing good, it will rarely occur to her that her attempts at moral enforcement might instead make the world a worse place.

This is not to say, of course, that anyone who imbibes Commencement Speech Morality will become a moralizer. Rather, the point is that if you want to create a generation of moralizers and reap the social costs, then teaching Commencement Speech Morality would be a good bet.

Meddling

Another cost of Commencement Speech Morality is that it motivates people to meddle in others' affairs. Whereas moralizing is an inappropriate exercise of moral enforcement, meddling is an inappropriate exercise of helping behavior.[46] Those who meddle—call such people "busybodies"—stick their noses in others' business and try to help. We can all agree that, generally speaking, helping people is good. But busybodies wrongly insert themselves into others' lives to solve their problems for them. Their intervention might be inappropriate because, like the moralizer, they do not know enough to help or because they lack the right kind of social standing to intervene. You might go around the gym and help correct everyone's weightlifting form, interrupt a conversation at a coffeeshop to explain why these people do not understand the economics of minimum wage law, or tell this guy that he is not using the right shampoo for his hair type. A group of high-minded college students might travel to a poor, remote, traditional village to explain how they should set up their society to conform to the ideals of gender egalitarianism. There is an endless supply of ways to help people.

Many cases of meddling are merely annoying or cause only minor interpersonal conflicts. But other forms of meddling cause great damage to people's lives. On the small scale, a busybody might overhear a retired couple and try to

[46] Tosi and Warmke, *Why It's OK to Mind Your Own Business.*

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convince them to invest their savings in his favorite new cryptocurrency. At a larger scale, meddling can result in disastrous military action or failed public policy.

Aside from the predictable annoyances and interpersonal conflicts put upon us by busybodies, this, then, is the most obvious cost of meddling: it often makes things worse. Not all meddling will do more harm than good. But much of it does, and this is a good reason to be cautious about intervening in others' affairs to help them and solve their problems, even when our hearts are in the right place and even if we are confident our efforts will have a positive impact. Intervening in others' affairs is risky business, and it is often an unfair risk to impose on others. It is one thing to try to solve your own problems and end up doing damage. It is another thing entirely to make others pay for your overconfidence as you try to solve theirs.

While some costs of meddling accrue to the objects of the busybody's intended aid, others are borne by the busybody herself. When meddling becomes a way of life, it takes the form of what psychologists call "pathological altruism." Whereas normal altruism involves a sustained ability to help others while still attending to your own needs and obligations, pathological altruism involves an unhealthy need to sacrifice oneself for others at the detriment of one's own welfare.[47] For the pathological altruist there is always something he can and should do to help others—one more dollar to give, one more meal to forgo, one more creature comfort to forswear—if it means helping only one person somewhere.[48] In doing so, pathological altruists sacrifice their own mental and physical well-being.

Let's return to Commencement Speech Morality. Consider again a moral outlook that tells young people that moral life is simple, other peoples' problems are also their problems, the world needs their well-intentioned interventions, and that they have an obligation to do big and world-changing things. What should we expect to happen?

I propose that someone who adopts such a life orientation will find it very difficult to avoid becoming a busybody. Her moral self-confidence buffers against concerns about mistakenly diagnosing problems or identifying solutions. Her conviction that a meaningful life involves tirelessly working to help others protects her from having second thoughts about devising solutions to other peoples' problems. And her commitment to doing big things on a big stage incentivizes her not to do what is helpful, but to do what will impress people and get attention. And often those are not the same thing.

I pause here to emphasize how harmful these messages can be for young people who try to live out Commencement Speech Morality. "From a very young age," writes one American teenager, "I have felt that I have the immense responsibility to change the world by advancing gender equality, eradicating racism, and resolving homelessness, among a countless number of other world-

[47] Beth J. Seelig and Lisa S. Rosof, "Normal and Pathological Altruism," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 49, no. 3 (2001): 933–59.

[48] For a collection of shocking and depressing stories about pathological altruists, see Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Urge to Help*, repr. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

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wide issues."[49] (We might substitute more traditionally right-wing causes here. The political valence does not matter for my present purpose.) These are, we must be frank, unreachable goals for any teenager. If these are your goals, you are going to fail. If we teach young people these should be their goals, we are setting them up for failure. And because failing at unreachable goals seems to be one cause of severe depression,[50] by conscripting young people into moral and political activism, we show selfish disregard for their mental health. Indeed, the weight of these responsibilities often leads young people to feelings of depression and burnout.[51] Consider, for example, the testimony of British teenager Chrissie Okorie:

> I was 19 when I first began my activism journey; I was so young, full of life and so much rage… . The workload became a lot as I also took on the role of a cultural leader in Coventry. I attended all the talks, performed at rallies and shows; it became so overwhelming that everyone talked about the movement everywhere I went… . I knew that the work of activism had begun to affect my mental health. But I remembered the vow I took to fight for change… . It was not until summer 2021 that I realised I had worked myself too hard: after I became overwhelmed with activism and found myself snapping at a friend and falling out with her.[52]

In incentivizing people to scour the planet looking for people to help, Commencement Speech Morality produces not just meddlers, but masochists.

Maintainer derogation

Edward Shils observes: "It is not often that gratitude is expressed to those who have maintained institutions in the state in which they received them. Their founders are praised; innovators are praised, but not those who have maintained what the innovators created."[53] Shils's point—or one way of thinking about his point—is that there are powerful social incentives for being a founder or an innovator, but many fewer rewards for those who pursue less visible lives devoted to maintaining the things that make social life tolerable at all.

Maintainers protect their institutions from erosion and destruction. Examples of institutions include libraries, elementary schools, the legal system, houses of

[49] Sophene Avedissian, "If You're a Teen Who Feels Pressured to Change the World, You're Not Alone," *The Teen Mag*, December 8, 2021, https://www.theteenmagazine.com/if-you-re-a-teen-who-feels-pressured-to-change-the-world-you-re-not-alone.

[50] Randolph M. Nesse and Daniela F. Sieff, "Emotional Evolution: A Darwinian Understanding of Suffering and Well-Being," in *Understanding and Healing Emotional Trauma*, ed. Daniela F. Sieff (New York: Routledge, 2014), 203–18.

[51] Jerusha Osberg Conner et al., "Burnout and Belonging: How the Costs and Benefits of Youth Activism Affect Youth Health and Wellbeing," *Youth* 3, no. 1 (2023): 127–45.

[52] Chrissie Okorie, "The Pressure of Being a Young Activist Drove Me to Burnout and Depression," *Metro*, April 3, 2022, https://metro.co.uk/2022/04/03/the-pressure-of-being-a-young-activist-drove-me-to-burnout-16314698/.

[53] Edward Shils, *Tradition* (1981; repr., Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

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worship, hospitals, mutual aid societies, businesses, the postal service, journalistic outlets, gyms, running clubs, police departments, markets, professional sports leagues, and universities. For most of us, the first institution we experience is the family. As the "building blocks of the social order," institutions form the backdrop of our lives.[54] We go through life relying on them, assuming they will be there when needed.

As "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction," the importance of institutions cannot be overstated.[55] By constraining and guiding our behavior, institutions create the possibility of a peaceful and predictable social order. They help us coordinate with others to solve problems and provide environments in which humans can find meaning and meet basic needs. Try imagining what your life would be like without them.

Commencement Speech Morality encourages young people to be Founders and Innovators. Start a charity. Invent a drug to cure cancer. There is nothing wrong with being a Founder or Innovator, but not everyone can be one. Nor should we want everyone to be one. An entire generation of CEOs and heads of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)? Society also needs Maintainers, that is, people who invest their time and energies in local institutions and try to preserve the good things that already exist.

Insofar as Commencement Speech Morality encourages only the life of a Founder and Innovator, it derogates the life of a Maintainer. This is the third and final social cost of Commencement Speech Morality. Maintainer derogation has two aspects. First, it discourages people from being maintainers. Second, it encourages people to look down on maintainers. Commencement Speech Morality derogates maintainers by telling young people to do big things, make their mark, start revolutions, and make a name for themselves. The implicit message is that the well-educated, "good people" are too good to live a pedestrian life of putting down roots, creating a good home, coaching tee-ball, and volunteering at the Kiwanis club. But Shils is right that being a Maintainer will not make you famous. So, Commencement Speech Morality has a serious problem. Ordinary people leading ordinary lives committed to maintaining the good things around them are vital to the preservation of social institutions. But Commencement Speech Morality encourages a different kind of life, one devoted to upsetting the status quo, making a splash, and solving global problems. The resulting social cost is that the maintenance of social institutions comes to be undervalued.

Conclusion

Is there a way for Commencement Speech Moralists to try to minimize these costs? Can it be fixed? I am doubtful, for to caution young people about the dangers of

[54] Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen, "Introduction," in *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*, ed. Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9–11.

[55] Douglass C. North, "Institutions," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (1991): 97–112.

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moralizing, meddling, and maintainer derogation is to backpedal on Commencement Speech Morality itself.

You might think, though, that for all its faults, it is still good that Commencement Speech Morality is preached to young people. After all, some will take these lessons to heart and succeed in doing great things that help people. Perhaps this is so. But is it good that Commencement Speech Morality is the only or primary message that young, well-educated people hear from the social elite? For the reasons I have given, I think this is not good. Perhaps the right response, though, is not to try to get people to stop preaching Commencement Speech Morality, but simply to offer an alternative, compelling message to young people.

In his own atypical commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, novelist David Foster Wallace remarked: "There happen to be whole, large parts of adult American life that nobody talks about in commencement speeches."[56] But perhaps we should. If you are ever asked, and I hope you are, you might try something like this:

> Settle down, get married, mind your business, create a good home, raise a family, and preserve and protect your local habitat and institutions from attack and decay. Try not to make the world worse or impose risky schemes of political and social experimentation on your fellow man. Coach tee-ball. Consider religion. Do your best to become a virtuous person and teach your children to be responsible, grateful, and happy friends, neighbors, and citizens.

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[56] David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 64.

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