The Sufficiency of Honesty and the Excellence of Integrity

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In his opinion piece for the *New York Times* Frank Rich defends Janet Jackson's Super Bowl "wardrobe malfunction," in which her breast was exposed during the halftime show. However, Rich's editorial investigation also reveals that the incident was anything but a simple "malfunction." Defying the statements made by those involved, Rich argues that the event was most likely planned as a publicity stunt by the N.F.L., Viacom, Timberlake, and Jackson—in short, by all involved. The stunt worked too. After the incident, Rich states, "Lycos, the Internet search engine, reported that the number of searches for Janet Jackson tied the record set by 9/11-related searches on and just after 9/11." According to Rich, the networks and persons involved got the media exposure they craved and could care less about the public's ethical views. This despite the fact that the views concerning the incident were mostly negative—many criticized it as distasteful and immoral. Rich argues that any type of controversy is good publicity, and if we want it to stop, we should stop giving it attention. The media looks to take advantage of the scandal to sell more papers and magazines and to get more people to tune into their shows. Critics are dropping heavy words into their articles—"responsibility," "ethics," "morality," and "integrity"—and we are left to question what these words actually mean. Do they still have meaning in a society that seems to be based in self-interest? Who—if anyone—*is wrong*?

To many journalists, the implicated parties lacked an essential set of ethics that would prevent them from revealing nudity on television during primetime. Many claim that those in power have a responsibility as leaders—positions that are defined by the role in the corporation (the executives at the NFL, CBS, and Viacom) or born out of the public eye (Jackson and Timberlake)—to act *ethically*. And that begs the question, what set of ethics—what set of rules—do we expect people in these positions to follow? Stephen

L. Carter would claim that the accused strayed from their ethical path when they abandoned thoughtful discernment about what is "good and right and true." He offers an easy solution when he states,"We expect our leaders to be people of integrity." Carter examines integrity and proves that its definition is much more complex than a dictionary citation might indicate. Virtues of commitment, steadfastness, consistency, compromise, compassion, and forthrightness as outlined in his essay "Why is Integrity Admirable?" point to the inherent complexity of integrity. As we consider Carter's requirements for integrity, we begin to understand his definition. Integrity is not just a good trait a person has; it becomes the embodiment of all those good traits we seemingly value. To Carter, the integral man is the ethical man, and vice versa.

All that Carter writes centers on his strong belief in discernment—the inherent obligation to reflect on one's morals. No matter which virtue we act on, there must be discernment. This most basic point is made clear in the beginning of "Coda" when he contrasts the difference between honesty and integrity: "The first point to understand is that a person may be entirely honest without ever engaging in the hard work of discernment that integrity requires; she may tell us quite truthfully what she believes without ever taking the time to figure out whether what she believes is good and right and true" (15). Carter would claim that Jackson and her cohorts lacked integrity—they were not good and right; they were *immoral*. It would seem simple to him, and he would end his debate at this point. However, we should ask Carter, how does one know when a certain belief has been tested thoroughly—what is his basis for discernment?

Joan Didion states in her essay "On Morality" that "'morality'" is "a word I distrust more every day" (63). Yet it seems as if many of us are more and more willing to put our blind faith in it. Carter would reply, "We believe, in other words, in conscience. Many of the great theologians shared the view that the knowledge of good and evil is somehow innate, so that if we can learn the right way to look for it, we can find the moral truth that too often eludes us" ("Coda" 28). Carter would most likely argue that this *must* be true; everyone makes moral decisions in life, and so we all have a moral basis for those decisions. Those "right" choices are based on an innate truth. "Evil" or "wrong," he might argue, result from a failure to discover, to learn, to "discern" correctly the "right" answer from our innate knowledge. "Evil…is not necessarily the result of a willed blindness to a revealed moral truth. The blindness may come about instead through a failure of discernment—a fail-

ure not in the will to discern but in the development of that faculty" ("Coda" 28).

Didion, on the other hand, states with caution that "it is difficult to believe that 'the good' is a knowable quantity" (65), and she is "quite obstinate about insisting that we have no way of knowing—beyond that fundamental loyalty to a social code—what is 'right' and what is 'wrong,' what is 'good' and what is 'evil'" (67). Furthermore, according to Didion, the steadfastness that Carter associates with integrity can be *dangerous* because the basis of discernment can quite possibly be nothing more than personal opinion, not innate truth. Didion argues that it is impossible be certain about the truth concerning right and wrong. And it is our steadfast conviction, when we believe that we are right, that provides the vehicle for madness and chaos. "Because when we deceive ourselves into thinking not that we want something or need something…but that it is a moral imperative that we have it, then is when we join the fashionable madmen" (68).

While in his writing Carter presents himself as a "discerning" person, he never discusses the basis for his own discernment. We need a set of morals or values on which to judge our morals. We need a relative standard, or else discernment can mislead us. The relationship is paradoxical and Carter fails to address this complexity. Hypocritically, to fail to realize the need for a base set of values when we discern is, in itself, a manifestation of our own inability to discern. Carter's argument, which lacks Didion's cautious discernment, is no better than the media's discussion of Jackson. Their eagerness to provide simple solutions to complex problems—to tie up the cases in neat little packages of truth, wrapping them with words such as honesty, morality, and integrity—proves to be their demise.

Carter's writing retains an aura of conservatism and although he would attack the media for their lack of discernment, he would likely attack them for another reason—a reason based on his own gut feelings of right and wrong that he *can't* explain, a feeling that underlies his own discernment. Carter attempts to more deeply explore morality, but he never makes the bridge between his discernment and this unexplainable basis. His exploration is too disjointed. Possibly Carter's moral basis is popular opinion, which he mentions and cloaks in semantics—the "American Core" of "moral understanding" ("Coda" 23). Yet, he also makes other points that complicate the situation. He acknowledges situations where the moralities of actions aren't very clear (although, at this point we can counter and say *all* situations have unclear moralities)—yet, instead of ending at this uncertainty, he goes on to state that "some answers to our moral dilemmas are truer and better than oth-

ers" ("Coda" 22). Carter keeps scratching the surface of the morality issue, but never directly addresses it in a structured argument. As mentioned before, he briefly refers to innate morality—a "universal right and wrong" or "conscience" ("Coda" 28)—as possibly being his set of base values, but without his going into much detail about it, many problems still remain: How do we go about discovering those values? And more important, how do we know there actually is a universal right and wrong? Will we ever be able to add meaning to these elusive words?

This past weekend I took a bus to Washington,D.C., and during the ride, I was seated next to a man who told me he had just retired from a modest job in social work and was living off his pension—he didn't seem well off by any means. However, he was well educated, as was clear through his vast span of knowledge concerning world events. He was a bit eccentric and lonely, and very eager to talk. It wasn't surprising that after I told him I was a freshman in college studying finance that he engaged me in a brief discussion about ImClone, the company that Martha Stewart and CEO Sam Waskal illegally traded. The day before, ImClone's drug Erbitux was approved by the FDA ("FDA Approves Erbitux")—two years before, it was rejected, and Stewart and Waskal profited off their private knowledge. My new friend knew all about the circumstances and chuckled at the irony of the situation. However, most surprising to me was his subsequent comment, "Who can blame them? I'd do the same thing in their shoes." Here was a poor, retired, old man who had more right than anyone to criticize the illegal actions of Waskal and Stewart, agreeing with their actions. I was amazed. The man I was talking to *seemed* like a very good person—I couldn't imagine him *stealing* from anyone (or condoning such actions). Later that day, I called my mother to discuss my amazement about the man on the bus and his opinions about business scandals, just to find out that she thought the very same thing! Nevertheless, I retained my opinion that such actions seemed *wrong*.

In his essay "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Its Profits," Milton Freidman argues that a corporation's only concern is to benefit the shareholders, as to do anything else would cut potential profits. "A corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the business [shareholders]. He has direct responsibility to his employers. That responsibility is to conduct the business in accordance with their desires, which will generally be to make as much money as possible…"(73). In other words, Friedman believes corporate executives'—corporate leaders like the ones involved in the Jackson incident and the Stewart case—responsibilities are solely to provide profits. Under this perspective lens, all parties in the Jackson incident

would be said to be acting "morally" in attempting to maximize profits, and Stewart and Waskal would be said to be "immoral," putting their company's profits at risk. If the situation was as cut and dry as Friedman makes it out to be, what's all the fuss about in the media? How can we have such opposite opinions concerning these events?

Out of all this confusion, as members of a society, we like to think that "some answers…are better than others" ("Coda" 22) and that we do indeed have an absolute morality by which to judge people's actions—or at the very least, a personal standard of morality. The daily activity of life and the choices we make *demand* such a standard. Unless we want to believe that all our important moral decisions in life are based on sheer randomness, we like to believe that we have a moral standard. We like to believe in right and wrong. We like to believe in absolutes. Furthermore, as Carter outlines the traits of integrity and his reasons for them, we find ourselves *mostly* agreeing with him. Why? There must be some logical standard or pattern to our moral decisions—or at least to Carter's concept of integrity—that can be uncovered.

In order to clarify these matters, let us now make an important distinction between *integrity* and *morality*. Integrity includes–although may not be limited to–the set of virtues that Carter outlines: consistency, steadfastness, compromise, compassion, and forthrightness. Much of the evidence Carter presents hinges on the notion that these are proven, agreed-upon social values. He makes constant references to successful and unsuccessful applications of such values in business. Let us therefore accept, on the basis of the empirical evidence he presents, those aspects of Carter's concept of integrity. Morality, however, is a somewhat different matter.

Morality calls for absolutes, a clear sense of right and wrong. We can wonder how the Jackson event might have changed if all leaders had followed Carter's strict code of integrity. I believe the incident would never have occurred, and there would have been no public dissatisfaction. A sense of integrity could have prevented the entire incident, but in the wake of its void, we are left to respond to what we consider the moral wrong. We may feel certain about that wrong, but we have to remember, as Didion has cautioned us, "that we have no way of knowing–beyond that fundamental loyalty to social code–what's 'right' and what is 'wrong,' what is 'good' and what is 'evil'" (67). We can't know just exactly how this "social code" is related to Carter's idea of integrity. But they do have in common a set of values based on consensus, or if not consensus, a set of inferences drawn from observed experience, not absolute truth.

In *The Story of Philosophy* Will Durant outlines the history of philosophers and their ideas. Something crucial to our investigation occurs when he describes Socrates' idea of Utopia: "If men could be taught to see clearly their real interests, to see afar the distant results of their deeds, to criticize and coordinate their desires out of a self-canceling chaos into a purposive and creative harmony…the advantage of every man would lie in social and loyal conduct, and only clear sight would be needed to ensure peace and order and goodwill" (8). Socrates reasons that if every man sacrifices his own shortsightedness—his own personal interests and desires—there would be in the long run a greater advantage enjoyed by all. We sacrifice our own immediate selfish goals for others, and in doing so we create a better future for ourselves. Yet, the relationship is paradoxical. It is our own personal greed for a better life that drives us to act in the interest of others, and in turn, expect that same selflessness from all those we encounter. When we judge the actions of another person, we scorn self-interest and praise self-sacrifice for others because it is in our own best interest to do so. This leaves me to question, just how moral is morality?

If we analyze the Jackson Super Bowl incident and the Stewart/Waskal case in light of these thoughts, we can say with some certainty that the people involved acted as they were expected to act—out of self-interested greed. The man on the bus wasn't condoning the actions of Waskal and Stewart; he just had enough *honesty* to admit that he would do the same thing. As members of humanity, all our actions are based in a degree of self-interest—it is paradoxically inescapable. Some people just have enough honesty to admit that they'd exploit others given the chance; and yet others have enough *integrity* to admit honestly that they wouldn't. But never with *conviction* can we say that the honest man was wrong.

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