

# Introduction

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Claire Foster-Gilbert

A public service institution can be imagined as a sailing boat. If it is a government department, at the helm stands the Permanent Secretary, who, like all good helmsmen, seeks never to steer the boat more than five degrees either side of the compass direction upon which the boat is set. Civil servants in the department form the crew, from the navigator who must know the course and ensure the helmsman anticipates obstacles, to the scrubber of decks who ensures no one slips up. All have their part to play in ensuring the boat remains shipshape and able to withstand the waves and the winds in travelling its appointed course. The same dispensation of roles and tasks would apply by analogy to other institutions.

The waves are the events of the nation and the world. They may be relatively calm or they may rise into steep and stormy mountains of water, threatening the stability of the boat.

The winds are public opinion, which can fill the sails of the boat and send it scudding on its chosen course. They can gust and buffet, interrupting the boat's smooth journey. Or they can blow adversely, threatening to push the boat off course altogether.

Hence, the helmsman cannot simply hold the tiller fixedly. He or she must constantly adjust to respond to the wind and the waves, aiming to keep within five degrees either side of the compass direction or risk increasingly over-compensatory swings away from the course of travel.

The compass point towards which the boat is sailing is, variously interpreted, the good. As such, since we have never seen absolute goodness, it is not so much a destination as a direction of travel: the journey itself is what matters, not the arrival.

By whom is the good defined and the direction of travel therefore determined? For the government department, the minister is granted that responsibility and privilege by virtue of having been elected by universal franchise. (More broadly, governments set the direction of travel for all the institutions within the nation they govern.) In defining the good, ministers have to have their party's support. And of course the strength of the prevailing wind, public opinion, may be such as to determine a change of compass direction altogether. For the politician, public opinion will set parameters on what he or she can achieve. The great political leader will have a vision of the good that transcends narrow-minded concerns but retains party support and respects the parameters set by the prevailing wind of public opinion. The visionary and skilled politician will learn, quite possibly from his or her civil servants, about the art of tacking. Because of course it is the helmsman and the crew who execute the tack and any

other sailing manoeuvres required. The civil service crew, having gathered the evidence – sniffed the wind, watched the waves – will need to be able to tell ministers when their proposed direction of travel will not work: when, whatever the ministers might want to think, their proposed direction is possibly not towards the good.

The point of the analogy is to show how dynamic and complex the art of public service is. The lazy assumption that ‘people in public life are not moral’ goes uncontested by too many of us, and it is not true, not of the vast majority of dedicated people who keep the ships of public service in all its forms on the move. But ‘moral’ is a word they shy away from. There is a kind of taboo around it, with the result that perfectly respectable moral disagreement subsides into a default assertion that every moral choice is equally valid and, by the same token, merely one lifestyle choice among many. There is no ‘good’ direction of travel; no visions beyond the horizon to pursue; only quotidian choices. This is a wholesale retreat from moral rigour, and it matters, very much indeed. We must not sleepwalk into national and global instability, fear and hate because we were afraid to defend what we believed to be right. If a boat has no clear direction to travel in, all that is really left for it to do is to keep afloat and not crash into anything else in the water. It finds its place only in relation to other boats. Its crew is busy, but not for any good reason.

We make moral choices all the time, whether we know it and own it or not. Every answer to the question ‘What ought I to do?’ has moral implications, from purchasing decisions to where we send our children to school, choices that seem personal, but are not. Public servants, including politicians and their clerks and advisers; civil servants; people in the

uniformed, diplomatic and secret services; teachers; lawyers; clinicians; journalists and ministers of religion make moral choices that clearly implicate others all the time. Allowing moral thinking to subside into the unexamined silt of our visceral beings is thus, for public servants, particularly hazardous. But it can become a habit, born of the fear of being seen as a moralizer; as an imposer of moral judgements on others; and also of getting it wrong.

There is historical force behind this habit. Politicians look back with haunted eyes at their predecessors who tried to speak of society's moral reawakening and were dragged into the mire for their efforts as the media gleefully found the skeletons in their cupboards. The consequence is lack of vision and the boat sails towards an unknown horizon, blown about by the changing winds of public opinion and the waves of economic unease, ecological crisis and warring peoples. Civil servants look back with haunted eyes at the career-limiting errors of judgement of their colleagues who were then briefed against by their ministers or who tried to speak truth to power and were cut by their ministers. For good reason, they choose instead to avoid bringing up the moral dilemmas all policy-making entails, using their intelligence to make the policy look coherent and make the minister happy, silencing the quiet voice that whispers reminders of historical slippery slopes into tyrannical regimes administered by efficient officials who also did not vest themselves in a mantle of moral responsibility. They concentrate on keeping the ship afloat and do not look up to see where it is heading. Risk aversion threatens moral courage in the armed and unarmed forces; teachers can feel forced to teach to the test; journalists to tell the story that is too good to check; ministers of religion mumble uninspiring

texts for fear of upsetting anyone. We are all guilty of the moral laziness that is born of fear.

And we all have skeletons, if not put in our cupboards ourselves then by our more interesting relatives. And everyone makes more or less imperfect moral decisions. What everyone also has, however, is a moral sense, which is kept alive not least by our awareness of our fallibility. Moral health, like physical health, has to be consciously maintained. The humility of self-knowledge is a start, but, like the regular exercise and good diet that follow from knowing how unfit we are, that same moral humility should give rise to attending to those things that keep our moral judgement reasonable and our responses to other people and the planet loving, attentive and true. We learn and re-learn how to choose compass directions that are oriented towards the good, and we practise the dynamic responsive helming that keeps us on course. We remain attentive to the ever-changing wind and waves. We take turns to keep watch.

This volume of essays and dialogues is based upon lectures given at Westminster Abbey Institute, where the listening stillness of the Abbey's porous medieval walls have heard a thousand years of heartfelt pleas for help in 'getting it right'. Westminster Abbey Institute was established in 2013 to revitalize moral and spiritual values in public life and service, working particularly with the public servants in the institutions of government and other forms of public service around Parliament Square: the Abbey's neighbours. The geography is pertinent: with the Houses of Parliament to the east, the Treasury and all of Whitehall to the north and the Supreme Court to the west, we have legislature, executive, judiciary on three sides, and the spiritual powerhouse of the

Abbey to the south, on standby to support and nourish the public service that is offered on the other three sides.

The essays seek to make the Abbey's walls speak: they are a bid to provide inspiration and method to orient our public servants' moral ships' compasses and kindle their moral strength in keeping on course. The essays do not provide a solid bulwark of moral certainty, because the helmsman must be free to adjust his or her steering, but rather seek to make the conscience of the public servant restless in the search for greater understanding of what the good is that we are all trying to reach towards, of what it means to serve; to reconnect with the vocation to public service; to recognize and stay alive to the moral dilemmas inherent in public service of all kinds; to work together to that end.

The first essay is by former Foreign Secretary William Hague, who writes of the different experience of speaking in Westminster Abbey, where he is not timed, rushed or interrupted and has a decent chance of being listened to and having his listeners reflect at leisure upon his words, from speaking in the Commons where none of those things necessarily pertains. The essay is a good place to start: Hague explores the role of Britain in the world as a moral force, lifting our eyes beyond the horizon of national self-interest and seeing how we can be of service internationally. 'Restless' in the title of this essay should be understood as not settled or certain or complete. Paradoxically, the conscience can remain restless when it feels safe to question and does not feel it needs to take refuge in dogma.

The three essays that follow, by Claire Foster-Gilbert, offer tools for growing moral courage. The first essay provides a framework of goal-based, duty-based and right-based questions for analysing a moral decision, showing how it

is that most decisions cannot be morally perfect and what, precisely, the moral cost of any decision might be. All actions have goals, and the first question to be addressed is the value and importance of that goal, but a good goal is not enough to justify an action. Will important moral principles, such as not lying or not harming, be sacrificed to achieve the goal? And what do those most affected by the decision feel about it? If the end seems right and the means are not harmful, but stakeholders do not want it, what then?

The second essay draws back from moral analysis to moral perception, looking at the way we see the world, exploring the values that we dearly hold. The suggestion is that right perception involves seeing that all things are interconnected, that all things have intrinsic value and not just value because of their usefulness and that we have to stop rushing about in order to see that this is so. Working towards such perceptions gives rise to a deep love, which is the best moral perception of all. If we love, we will act well towards each other, far better than if we simply know more; for while the growth of knowledge increases power, the growth of love increases service.

In the third essay, recognizing that moral courage is earned through character development, the reader is taken on a 'hero's journey' from hearing a call out of his or her ordinary world, questioning the call, meeting a mentor who gives courage to cross the threshold on to the journey, facing trials and overcoming them, making mistakes, learning who are allies and who enemies, facing the darkest time when everything has gone wrong, facing a great ordeal, claiming the prizes and going on to a new level of life as a servant leader, having learned the lessons of the journey, the chief of which is, perhaps, that the journey is not about the so-called

hero but about everyone else. The journey has to be taken for this knowledge to dawn: there are no shortcuts to the growing of moral character.

Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland, in dialogue with John Hall, Dean of Westminster, describes with lyrical wisdom the painful participatory experience of bringing together people who have hated each other for centuries and, in her words, ‘missed each other by a mile’. ‘We interrogate ourselves, not each other, and learn our own failings, instead of gaining doctorates in each others.’ Her yearning for peace sings through her prose. She took no shortcuts. Her shrewd sense of the vital role of politics in achieving it is a manual for any who feel in themselves the call to serve through these means.

Vernon White’s three essays on the theme of idealism and compromise explore how we are kept morally alive by our constant failure to live up to our ideals while at the same time finding that we are unable to renounce them. Compromise is contextualized by idealism and is its foil: understanding it as such means we will stretch our moral and spiritual fibre beyond what we think we can achieve. In his second essay, White demonstrates profound self-awareness in his observation that the force of moral energy is misplaced into loud denunciations of others’ behaviours because moral relativism means we no longer trust its direction. This is an observation made on the way to his principal argument that the moral impulse, always calling us to see more need than we can ever hope to meet, carries the quality of the infinite. But rather than being permanently distressed by voracious moral demand, somewhat surprisingly we can relax: relax into the realization that we cannot, alone, meet all our ideals and, when we fail, we need not adopt a self-regarding

tragedic heroic justification but should continue to pursue the real goal of our original endeavour. Purposefulness, explored in White's third essay, refuses to be put down, as he shows: it survives even the most persistent setbacks. Such staying power indicates the existence of a wider narrative, the full extent and depth of which we cannot see. In this understanding of purpose, successes and failures are not indicators of progress or its lack, but dynamic movements within a cosmic narrative in which we play our part.

Westminster Abbey is a Benedictine Foundation dating from 960, when a small group of monks arrived on Thorney Island under the patronage of King Edgar and St Dunstan. Rowan Williams sets the Foundation to work, as it were, in service of Parliament Square, which has grown around it. He draws on the Benedictine vow of stability, describing it as 'not going away'. The crew, to return to the analogy at the beginning of this Introduction, will not abandon ship. Nor, importantly, will it be assumed that difficulties can be solved by making the stranger walk the plank. He or she is not going away either. The Benedictine Rule identifies honesty, peace and accountability as critical to the health of any community: honesty in our dealings with others and our own self-awareness; peace sustained not falsely by avoiding conflict, but authentically by paying close attention to everyone's needs; and accountability particularly of the abess or abbot to the particular skills and gifts of the members of the community. Williams asks: what is the currency of any institution or community, which is to say, what do people in the group talk about when they see each other in the corridors, in the coffee breaks (in the galley and companionway)? Often, and tellingly, the currency is grievance, and that is not healthy.

The following three essays offer further treasures from the Benedictine tradition, with interpretations of three Benedictine virtues of stability, community and conversion of manners, for public service in the twenty-first century. Vernon White characterizes stability as ‘creative fidelity’. He points to the many destabilizing forces that can undermine a secure sense of self and belonging and can make us vulnerable to fundamentalist political or religious ideologies that falsely promise security. Fidelity means faithfulness over time to people and institutions; it is creative because the constancy is at the same time challenging, harnessing change to deal with the change we see in others and in ourselves as we walk alongside one another, ‘not going away’. There is resilience to be found in a symbiotic rather than an opposing relationship between Heraclitus’ flux and Parmenides’ constancy. Stability can be a casualty of modern liberalism, but not if it is a call to a progressive, life-giving, healing and dynamic disposition of person and institution.

Andrew Tremlett offers a detailed historical, etymological and social analysis of ‘community’. He draws lessons from the tough and counter-cultural call the monk hears to join a monastic community and the efforts that are made to put him off. A strong community calls for intentional communion, hard work and sacrificial living. Tremlett convincingly demonstrates how much the communities of Westminster and Whitehall: Parliament, the judiciary and government departments, not just the Abbey itself, have a strong ethos and culture, and their members have a sense of vocation and loyalty to the cause and purpose of their institutions.

In the third essay, Claire Foster-Gilbert draws upon the imponderable ‘conversion of manners’ of which Benedict writes, understanding it as a readiness to re-convert: regularly

heading out to the metaphorical desert to re-tune, re-member and be ready to allow paradigms to shift and new connections to be made, aware that the first conversion (strong desire to make a difference, save the world, etc.) can be the greatest enemy of the second. Morality is dynamic, and so should we be.

Peter Hennessy, in conversation with Claire Foster-Gilbert, leaves us with the sweetest note, however. In a conversation that took place amidst the profoundly destabilizing political events of 2016, he sings the Benedictine threnodies that run through this volume of stability, intentionality and purpose. He lauds the public service that does not shout about itself, that takes its place in the company of all those who have gone before and will follow, playing its part, unsung and for the most part unknown. He wonders if a memorial for the ‘unknown public servant’ should stand in Westminster Abbey. There is one, recently laid, for the security services of MI5, MI6 and GCHQ. It and the older Grave of the Unknown Warrior are fitting comparators for and an explicit acknowledgement of what public service really is. The most important, most morally sensitive and courageous service is often that which will never be seen.

The essays and dialogues can be read individually or as a collection. They will appeal in different ways. None is intended to moralize, rather to share the skill, the effort, the camaraderie and the humour involved in making robust moral decisions, in everything that is involved in sailing the ship towards a good destination, which should, after all, be seen as a profound and defining human endeavour for us all.