The Sceptic presents
The case for... and against
Virtue

More than five centuries ago, Socrates sat around ancient Athens engaging in philosophical dialogue with the local citizens. One question that was debated at length was ‘What is virtue?’ Let us fast-forward to today and try to answer that question.

Is virtue that which brings everything into harmony? Yet one might inquire whether beauty and harmony and order are all virtues themselves or whether they are constituents of qualities that make up virtue. One view of virtue might be that is a combination of several human characteristics such as honesty, piety, being charitable and telling the truth – in short, being good. These are traditional religious values, applicable even if one does not believe in religion.

Qualities vs function
Socrates might better have tried to define virtue more in terms of its function or the ends it serves, rather than on dwelling upon the qualities of which it is made. It seems to me that no two people, no two societies take the same road to becoming more virtuous. But I think they all have the same starting place. They start by asking, ‘What is virtue?’, because only by answering that question can you then answer, ‘How can we become more virtuous?’

Virtuous lies
But if this is so, are there any circumstances where, for example, not telling the truth might be considered virtuous? Yes, you might say, not telling a frail old woman that her son had been killed in a car crash, was a virtuous deed. Telling her the truth might very well kill her too, and it might just be kinder to tell her that he had gone away for an extended period on business. It might be kinder not to tell a young child that it had cancer until the last possible moment. A German gentle hiding a Jew during World War II might have lied to save him from the Gestapo. Plato thought that these could be considered ‘noble’ lies.

Virtue and excellence
Another possible view is that ‘What is virtue?’ could be the same as asking, ‘How can we become more excellent?’ and ‘Is becoming successful a virtue?’ In certain cultures, for example the Navajo Indians of North America, ‘personal excellence’ is a key value, while ‘personal success’ is not, although it is in the general European/North American culture, which is all about personal success. For the ancient Greeks, every deed and act was committed for the greater rather than the individual good. There was no private self then as there is today, only a self that was part of a whole. In this respect it is akin to the ‘dharma’ of Hinduism. Virtue encompasses not only an individual’s duty to himself, but also to his religion, society and nation.

Japanese virtues
Compare our Western values to those of the Japanese where tatame, the public side, is kept separate from homme, the private side. Homme means ‘genuine feelings’, whereas tatame means ‘masking yourself, hiding your feelings’. This is why Japanese go to great lengths to avoid confrontation. In Japan, each individual must have a co-operative spirit, and must care for the excellence of the group more than for, and before, individual excellence. To the Japanese, virtue creates social harmony. Unfortunately though, all is not social harmony, not in Japan nor in Great Britain.

Present-time virtue
Virtue at present is defined in different terms: not the good that you do, but what you can get away with. A few years ago, a cricketer who snicked the ball would walk, before the umpire raised his fin-