

DRAFT ONLY

Justice and Hope

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Anyone who loves children will know how easily the fierce desire that they should be happy can conflict with the desire that they live decently and justly. I was fortunate to have been raised by two men, both of whom lived, with passion, a precept Socrates introduced into the world two and a half thousand years ago – that it is better to suffer evil than to do it. Nothing, they believed, matters more than to live decently, and when I say nothing, I really mean nothing. Those of you who have read *Romulus, My Father*, will know why I say that I learned from the life of my father and his friend Pantelimon Hora that the connection, such as it is, between goodness and happiness is fragile.

Which is perhaps why young people who are idealistic are often told by their elders that the world will soon enough teach them to become realistic. They usually mean that their concern for justice should not be so fierce, that human nature will disappoint them. The more fierce their commitment to justice, the more bitter will be their disappointment.

In the last few years, two of my daughters worked abroad for human rights groups – one worked in Guatemala where she helped gather evidence to support charges of crimes against humanity and genocide against two former presidents; the other in Israel with B'Tselem, an organization that monitors Israel's abuses of Palestinian rights on the West Bank. These are not countries whose politics inspire optimism and my daughters returned with theirs subdued. Since then, it has seemed to me that they have been recovering hope in the world, hope of a kind which is not dependent on optimism, nor in any simple way a function of their assessment of how things will turn out.

In common with many of their peers they believe that their generation and that of their children are likely to be overwhelmed by conflicts arising from the

shameful gap between the rich and the poor nations, compounded by ecological crises. I fear they are right. Their generation and the generation after them will not be protected to the degree that mine has been from the terrors suffered by most of the peoples of the earth, because of poverty, natural disasters and the evils inflicted upon them by other human beings. More and more, I fear, the reality of affliction together with the reality of evil will test their understanding of what it means to share a common humanity with all the peoples of the earth, and to a degree almost too awful to imagine, their faith that the world is a good world despite the suffering and the evil in it. What can sustain that faith? Is there a more practical and urgent question, one more urgently in need of sober realism in its formulation and in answers offered to it?

Plato's answer is the best I know. He saw that the critical focus of what one might call a moral psychology (and, he might add, a metaphysics) of moral and political commitment should not be on intentions, motives and character, but instead, on the true sources of one's energies. Those sources, he thought, would determine the nature of our intentions, motives, and character. We become like what we love, he said, and the quality of our love – what kind of love it is or whether we should even call it love rather than one of its many counterfeits - will be a function of the kinds of things to which we give our attention and of the quality of that attention.

Some years ago I launched booklet written entirely by women who suffered from cancer. It was called *Women and Cancer*.

The stories in it were heartbreaking but also inspiring, largely because of the quality of the women's matter-of-fact attention to detail. From a perspective where deep suffering had placed them, a perspective informed by the prospect of death and often by the fear of it, all the women claimed that they had come to see what really mattered to them. So at first I was surprised that they talked so often - albeit in many tones - about how to respond to hair loss caused by chemo-therapy, about the many kinds of wigs on the market, about the many benefits of hot water bottles, and other things of that kind. I was

expecting more dramatic reassessments of their lives and the things they had previously given their hopes and energies to. There were such reassessments, but I soon realized that in the quality of their attention to relatively homely detail, the women affirmed what they had in common with their past selves and, thereby, with the world as they now shared it with people who had been spared suffering like theirs. The quality of their attention to detail secured the authority of their revaluations. For the most part, their stories were faithful to life in both senses of that expression - they were realistic, truthful, they refused to falsify, and they expressed loyalty to the world.

For me these were stories of hope. Not, however, because the women hoped to live. Some did; others did not, believing it was a false hope. (Some died before the book was published.) Each day many of them experienced a terrifying onslaught of powerful and conflicting emotions: anger, resentment, fear, gratitude and more. At its deepest, however, the fact that they had not abandoned hope did not show in their orientation to the future – not in anything that stands on a line with pessimism at one end and optimism at the other. It showed in the way they kept faith with the world, never seriously turning their back on it, making themselves newly answerable each day to life's invitation – perhaps better, to its call – to wonder at the marvel of the world.

Two of the contributors to that booklet said that more than any other of the powerful emotions they suffered – anger, terror, bitterness, resentment, gratitude joy – it was envy that most often drove them into a despair from which they feared they would never recover. They envied people who appeared to them to be robustly healthy, just as some old people envy young people. “Why me?” was a question all the women asked at some time. Prompted by many different thoughts and feelings, it was asked in many tones, but it became envy when it fastened, sorrowfully, resentfully and sometimes worse, on the delightful good health of a younger woman.

Iris Murdoch, influenced by Simone Weil's reading of Plato, shows wonderfully, in her philosophical works and in her novels, the ways in which attention must be directed outwards, rather than inwards where it is sometimes captivated narcissistically by the infinitely many charms of what she calls "the fat relentless ego", or at other times bitterly entrapped by forms of resentment, brooding on injuries to one's vanity, real or imagined, and, of course, by envy. Envy is sometimes described merely as sadness at the fact that others possess good we desire. Sometimes it is not much more than that. But more, even, than violent and destructive hatreds, envy can undermine the capacity for that kind of openness that is a condition for *any* of the forms of love of the world. The unhappiness that is always part of envy can turn into bitter malevolence. When it does so in anyone who is moderately decent and self-knowing, it can provoke self-disgust. Forms of mean-spiritedness – they range from envy to the kind of uptight moralizing against which Henry James enlisted what he called "responsiveness to life"– undermine love of the world more surely than large-hearted anger or even hatred. They chain attention to the ego and make it almost impossible for a person to turn away from things in whose light the world can appear even to be an *intelligible* – let alone a real – object of love and loyalty. Envy can be the meanest, the most poisonous of them all.

I offer this example of how the women's loyalty to the world was humbly sustained by the kind of attention they gave to their clothes, their wigs and their hot water bottles as an illustration of Plato's idea that our energies depend not just on what we attend to, but, just as importantly, on the spirit of that attention. He tells us that lovers of wisdom cling in recollection to wonders they had seen. The means by which those women clung, by which they tried to prevent their love of the world from waning, seem banal by comparison with the cause those means were enlisted to serve. Nonetheless, the women's choice of them was an expression of their wisdom. Perhaps their example is not the kind one would first think of to illustrate anything deep in Plato but I offer it to you, nonetheless.

It is not much different in public life, not even in politics, I think. Please allow me to speak personally.

When I was a teenager, I sailed on a reservoir in central Victoria, Australia, with a man, I mentioned earlier. His name was Pantelimon Hora and he was a second father to me. He often told me stories as we sailed. Usually they were stories of men and women who had been persecuted or ridiculed for their beliefs or who had resisted tyranny. Always, he said, even in the most appalling circumstances, there have been a handful of men and women who redeemed humanity by the nobility of their vision and their courage to be true to it. He told me this often.

Hora laughed often, especially when conversation made him fully alive. Two things in particular provoked his laughter: innocence that had become comic and arrogance that had become ridiculous. He told me of a research scientist devoted to truth, but whose colleagues mocked him when he was younger. Poverty forced him to live in a room so small that when he put on his jacket, he had to open the window in order to get his arm through the sleeves. Later he became famous, but Hora made it clear that fame had never been his ambition. As Hora told it, this story was not so much about courage or persistence, or even integrity. It was about goodness and purity as they showed themselves in this scientist's love of truth. He laughed over this story, repeating it many times, but his laughter was always gentle, affectionate, and even reverent.

Arrogance that had become ridiculous provoked a different laughter from him. All his life he scorned, humbug pretence and hypocrisy and in those younger days he scorned it fiercely. Even then, however, the ferocity of his scorn almost always gave way to a sense of the ridiculous. A story that often began with his eyes flashing in anger, ended in laughter. He told me of another research scientist, also devoted to truth and to humanity, who presented his findings, with a passionate sense of their importance, to his colleagues. Throughout the lecture his colleagues interrupted with cries of "Nonsense!" "Humbug!" "Impostor!" Finally the scientist's temper snapped. "Half of this

audience is stupid”, he shouted. Outraged, the person who was chairing the meeting demanded that the speaker retract his insulting words. “Alright”, said the scientist, “I sincerely apologize. Half of this audience is not stupid.” Again and again Hora repeated, “Half of this audience is not stupid”, and again and again he laughed.

Because the ferocity of Hora’s scorn for arrogance and humbug invariably gave way to laughter, his stories never inclined me to cynicism. Nor did they tempt me to become a debunker. I was young so that is not surprising. But when I try to understand why the inspiring examples of a few men and women should count against the folly and much worse of millions (as it then seemed), when I try to understand why those stories have nourished me throughout my life, I know the answer must include the way Hora was so distinctively present in their telling, his openness to the world and the quality and many tones of his laughter. And, strange though it may sound, it must include his sensuous love of the sun and the water, and how, in between stories, he plunged into the lake from the boat, swimming sideways, forwards and backwards, whooping and splashing. From none of that can I abstract the distinctive quality of his humanism – as a set of principles, for example. In that sun drenched, summer colored humanism I found food to nourish hope. The physical details I have dwelt on bring out – in the same way as the women’s attention to wigs and water bottles did – the necessarily embodied nature of our at home-ness in the world.

Even as a young man, Hora was given to pessimism, and in his later years to melancholy. Neither undermined his gratitude to people who had shown by their lives that our humanity is neither fixed nor secure, but always something we are called upon to rise to; and neither undermined his grateful wonder at the beauty of the world.

His example – the way he became an example for me – was a function of the way he spoke of the men and women who had nourished his spirit and the way I saw that spirit animating his life. For me (unconsciously at the time, to be sure) the importance of these examples did not lie in the effect they had on

my disposition to pessimism or to optimism or indeed on any psychological dispositions that would colour my orientation to the future. Their importance lay in the redemptive light they cast on the world. I mean that the light they cast enabled me to see the world as a good world in ways that were not conditional on anything that looked like a reasonable assessment of whether the good outweighed the evil in it.

“How can that be?” you might ask. To answer I will tell a story first told by the philosopher Norman Malcolm about his great teacher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Malcolm reports that when Wittgenstein was on his deathbed he asked his housekeeper to “tell them [his friends] that it has been a wonderful life”. Wittgenstein was not expressing an assessment of his life; he was not making a *considered* or *judicious* remark; he was not expressing a *judgement*. Anyone who understood him would not ask him to reconsider and perhaps to qualify what he had said. It belongs to the nature of what Wittgenstein said that it should deflect any invitation that he reconsider it or for us to assess it. We would badly misunderstand what he said if we think it could engage with the question: did he really want to say that it was *wonderful*? Might it, on consideration, be more accurate merely to say, that it had been quite good?

Malcolm says that when he reflected on the evident misery of much of Wittgenstein’s life he found it deeply moving that Wittgenstein should have said what he did, but he did not suggest that knowledge of that misery might provide a reason to challenge the strict veracity of what Wittgenstein said. There is a sense (perhaps it is the primary sense) in which the remark that one had had a wonderful life **would be** an assessment of one’s life and would therefore render appropriate an invitation that one might reconsider, that it might express an exaggeration. But had Wittgenstein intended his remark to have that sense, Malcolm would not have been moved in the way he was. That is why I said that Wittgenstein was not passing a judgement on his life, that it was not a considered or a judicious remark - which does not, of course, mean that it was thoughtless. It was the expression of gratitude for his life considered as a certain kind of whole, and because it was not based on an assessment, on a weighing of the good and the ill in it, it is right to call the

gratitude unconditional.

Hora's face reminded me of Albert Camus, which is perhaps why I recognized in him the same kind of humanism and why I responded so quickly, with something like love, to his writings. Camus is known for making Sisyphus an Existentialist Hero, someone who disdained false hope and false consolation as fiercely as the soldier in the first act of the Aeschylus Agamemnon trilogy, who says that he would not give a farthing for the mortal whom false hopes could set afire. *The Myth of Sisyphus* begins with the astonishing claim that "there is only one serious philosophical problem and that is suicide". Even as a young man I believed that to be posturing, and that what follows is often a muddle. Even so, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, there is something so fine that one seldom finds it in Camus' more clear-headed critics.

To find it the reader should go to the lyrical essays on Algerian cities and on the desert in Oran. Nowhere is Camus' tragic humanism more attractive than in his celebration, in those lyrical essays, of the loves of the young men and women of Algiers. And nowhere is the celebration of their yearning for a happiness, whose fulfilment is always short-lived, more tenderly qualified by a sense of the tragic, made all the more heartrending by the poetic beauty of its expression.

These essays are marked throughout by an intensity about what it means to live truthfully that now seems alien to us. It would be a mistake to assume that in Camus it was merely another expression of the intensity with which French intellectuals characteristically respond to philosophical questions about meaning, value and purpose. When it is authoritative and impressive rather than grandstanding, the intensity of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is the expression of Camus' fearful love of the world – fearful because he is always so conscious of the many ways he might be betray it. Camus' need for lucidity (the word appears often in his writings) is not a response to abstract philosophical doubts. It is a form of fidelity to his love of the beauty of the world.

And so is his rejection of the kind of suicide that disdains the world – that would leave it “as though it were a smoke-filled room”, as Kant put. Camus writes with considerable anger against those who turn their back on the world, especially if they would make a virtue or even a philosophy or a religion out of it. Despite his torments, his Sisyphus discovers a joy that is an expression of an unconditional love of the world. Like everything else, this love is vulnerable to misfortune. To think otherwise would be hubris, for at any moment we can lose everything that gives sense to our lives. If it is lucid, an unconditional love of the world must acknowledge that affliction might destroy it.

In ‘Return to Tipasa’, perhaps the most poignant of his Algerian essays, a war-weary Camus, reflects on what at first looks like the tensions between a life that is obedient to the inescapable demands of justice and his (seemingly) innocent love of the sun and the sea and the many moods of the Mediterranean sky. The choice, he soon realises, is illusory. A love of the beauty of the world that abandons the demands of justice is in danger of becoming a form of misanthropy, always a humanly self-mutilating form of hope abandoned.

Justice, as Camus recognised, is the pre-eminent political standard. It is the standard in whose light we should judge most other political ideals and aspirations. Sometimes it is the direct end of political action, as when people seek to secure equal access to goods and opportunities, for example, or more fundamentally, when they seek equality of respect. When women, or victims of racism, or gays ask to be treated equally, then theirs is not, in the first instance, a plea for equal access to goods and opportunities, although such access will usually follow if their plea is successful. It is a plea for justice conceived as equality of respect. In *A Common Humanity*, I said that a concern for justice is, in large part, a concern that our institutions encourage us to see, and, in seeing, is to be fully responsive to the full humanity of our fellow citizens, including of course, those of our fellow citizens who are criminals.

There are, of course people, who fight for justice, with phenomenal energy, but who have no love of the world of the kind for which I have been trying to find words. Driven by duty and perhaps energised by dreams like the one Martin Luther King expressed so eloquently in his speech 'I Have a Dream', their commitment to justice and their energies are a hostage to the outcome of the battle. Dreamers almost always wake up to find that reality is dispiritingly different from their dreams, and when they do, they often lose faith in the fact that though we may answer differently to the demands of justice, our answerability to those demands is non-negotiable. That is another way of saying that they lose faith in the reality of justice.

Those who were inspired by King's speech were often aroused to action but they were also taken to something deeper. They developed a new sense of the importance of justice to their lives – to what it means to lead a fully human life. Like the women in the hospital, their sense of what mattered in life was radically transformed. The concerns which had hitherto shaped their lives, their studies, their ambitions for a certain career, appeared relatively unimportant. The power of Luther King's rhetoric did not merely serve his desire to mobilise an audience to action. It served his desire that they see the meaning of their lives in a certain light. He wished to take them to a certain height from which they would, as we say, 'see things in their proper perspective'. But if a person's deepest passions have been stirred by a vision of a just future, and if his deepest hopes have been given as a hostage to its realization, then if he is forced to abandon such hope, his sense of the reality of justice as the proper object of our deepest passions is destroyed along with the hope.

Despite King's best intentions his speech encouraged those who were moved by its indisputable power to be unfaithful lovers of justice because it encouraged them to believe that their sense of the reality of justice could be sustained by a dream of the future. Repeated defeats and disappointments sapped the energies they needed to be faithful to justice. Later, many of them said that justice is for young dreamers. Others said that a concern for justice is fine in its place, but like morality more generally, justice should find its

proper place, make a reasonable accommodation to the world. From such people we often hear that we must get the balance right. We hear it often today.

As applied to moral and political judgment the metaphor of a balance is beguiling but misleading. Think of a scale. You put one kilo on one side and two on the other. Everyone knows how much the scales will tip. If they don't, one throws always the scales, assuming confidence in ones weights. If one lacks that confidence, there are publicly available and uncontroversial methods of settling the matter. Now think about people and their values. One person values life and the life of his loved ones almost above all else. For him anything that endangers his life or theirs will tip the scales in favour of choosing all available means to improve security. If his fellow citizens are of much the same mind, then that will show in their conception of the responsibilities of citizenship, of the national interests and of the common good. Another person believes that nothing matters more than to live decently and honourably. Often she will have to renounce means – sometimes they will be the only means – she knows could protect her and what she cherishes, because it would be dishonourable or even evil to use them. For her the scales tip against security and if her fellow citizens are of the same mind, then that will inform their conception of the responsibilities, of citizenship, of the national interest and of the common good. When, therefore, some people ask, “should we not sometimes torture people for the sake of the common good?” others will answer that it is inseparable from their conception of the common good that we do not even consider such a suggestion. Terrorists, they will say, threaten only our lives. By our responses to them, it is we who threaten the political and cultural life that we hold dear and with it a richer conception of the national interest.

Responding to calls to be realistic, to the reminder that politics is the art of the possible, she will say that among ‘the possible’ are moral possibilities, and among the constraining realities there are moral realities. Some possibilities are open only when one thinks of the national interest as in part constituted by our interest in being just and in being able to love our country without shame.

My point is not that we should teach young people to abandon duty for love, or that that we should discourage them from dreaming of a better world. It is that their sense of the place of justice in their lives should not depend on the energies that such dreams sustain. If they enjoy their dreams, but resist their temptations, then their commitment to justice, their idealism, will not be based on an assessment of how things will turn out, and they cannot be accused of being unrealistic in such assessment. Reflection on duty, on the nature and requirements of justice, on what it is to honour those requirements, on the virtues and vices of being a dreamer and of our understanding of the place of motives and intentions in the moral psychology of political commitment – all this should be informed by Plato's simple but profound insight that we become like what we love.

If it matters that we teach our children to hope, then if we teach them to dream we must first teach them to love.

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