

**The superiority of the humanistic over the religious
instinct on
injustice, suffering, and courage**

The great philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote (in his "Doctrine of Suffering of the World") that "whoever wants summarily to test the assertion that the pleasure in the world outweighs the pain, or at any rate that the two balance each other, should compare the feelings of an animal that is devouring another with those of that other." (trans. E.F.J. Payne)

This argument is designed to be "brutal"—but by extension it refers of course to the impossible situation of human beings in which they constantly have to contend with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, only to find, after each victory, that their triumph is a bit of an anticlimax, to say the least. The more capricious adversity a person overcomes the more he or she finds that life is a mere grind¹, an undignified "mind game" with a shadowy opponent who is both everywhere and nowhere, and that this elusive antagonist is the world itself ("the world" meaning both the natural world and the world of human affairs).

It is often held that there is a "grandeur" in the struggle of human beings to survive in the face of adversity, indeed that their very nobility is based on it, in that they are aware of their own suffering; these assertions, however, have to be heavily qualified: by definition, the

¹ Please see appendix!

highest endeavour is to take on the world, and the nobility lies in not accepting the situation. Here it is interesting to note that to have a sense of humour in great adversity is usually regarded as being especially admirable, which it is, but then it is that much more important to remember that in humour there is a very significant element of aggressiveness of man against the world.

In the film “Den Goda Viljan” (with Ingmar Bergman’s script) the Queen of Sweden asks a young, idealistic priest in a somewhat “grand” manner whether he thought that “we are cleansed through suffering” and the priest (Ingmar Bergman’s father: the film is about his parents²) answers that “I don’t know if suffering cleanses us but I’ve seen many cases where suffering destroys and deforms”. Exactly! The answer clearly reveals impatience with the Queen’s pretension but more than that it forcefully makes the point that the supposed “grandeur” in suffering fades even more when the sufferers turn into monsters themselves. Of course, since experience shows that life is full of adversity, a certain amount of hardship is good and necessary for “training” purposes—up to a point.

So, there is a kind of grandeur in active resistance to outrageous fortune, but it’s grotesque to infer from this that we “need” suffering: the truly great would be to truly take arms against a sea of troubles and to completely defeat the causes of pain themselves, eliminating them entirely from existence and replacing them with things that actually make life better. Now this isn’t an easy thing to do and the fact of the matter is that it’s always the best and bravest who take the hits on the (real) front line, both literally and figuratively, whereas certain

² Please see appendix!

individuals have the knack of taking just enough risk to get the credit and rewards while also making sure that they end up surviving as well. We accept that no one said that life would be easy nor indeed that it should necessarily be easy, but if we accept this and fight with honour (meaning that one takes no satisfaction in any easy victory and always tries to do the hardest things possible) then in return we have the right to expect a natural compensating reaction, at least in the reasonably long run, while for the individuals who fight dishonourably the opposite should be the case, and there are, to be sure, all sorts of individuals who deserve all sorts of retribution, that hardly needs saying.

It should be stressed that the point here is not that things never work out in a way which is just, fair, and satisfying, but rather that the level of inconsistency and capriciousness is way too high, the net result being a revolting mish-mash of outcomes; the net result of this, in turn, is that the world does go forward but it does so in a clumsy, inefficient, short-sighted, inelegant and disproportionate way. Hence the popularity of fairy tales—everyone loves it when circumstances come together perfectly for once which we intuitively know they hardly ever do...I thought I'd also mention here in passing the charming quip published on May 17th, 1999 in the newspaper Göteborgs Posten under the signature "Räpan": "To understand the world you need to use a little common senselessness"! (Swedish = lite vanligt vanvett)

The world is unfair—everybody knows that—what isn't so obvious is that it is inherently unfair, and even more than that it is not just unfair "most of the time", it is so unfair as to constitute an actual outrage and provocation, as if the meaning itself of the world were for us to have to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. The problem then

becomes one of figuring out what point there might possibly be to that...the Queen of Sweden's sentiment expressed above is one of a number of "solutions" that have been "inspired" by religion, all of which are totally inadequate (another is that the whole point of life is that it is a series of trials or tests sent down to us, these being most often explained away and/or rationalized in an utterly arbitrary manner as either "tests of character" or "tests of faith"). As far as I know, there is no religion which even recognizes that the world is inherently unfair (let alone which has any explanation for why that should be), and what we need most of all is a recognition that it is, in order to be able to properly formulate policies which allow for honourable competition as far as possible. Here I would like to clarify that it isn't in the slightest bit disturbing that everyone doesn't have the same potential—what is outrageous is that most potential is wasted and most of that is obviously found in persons of the most potential; furthermore, what is best for society as well as the individual is that the full potential of each individual be realized, and the more advanced a society is, the more sophisticated, reliable and accurate are its methods of ensuring that everyone has at least a fighting chance of actually doing this, in reality and not just on paper!

Getting back to the business of religion, it is blindingly obvious that it is a cultural artefact expressing the character of the people who created it, and people, also collectively as a group, believe what they want to believe and see what they want to see, especially if it makes themselves or their own group appear superior in some way—if there is one law of psychology it is this³. Not that it's illegitimate to be proud of one's achievements: everyone has the right—nay, the obligation!—to explain

³ In practice, of course, the extent to which this law applies varies widely

to others what they think is best about themselves and why—there’s nothing wrong with that and in fact one can see that it usually doesn’t lead to major problems. The problems start when people try to get something for nothing, and this we know can take very many forms and we should try to expose it, everywhere; for example: the fact that a certain custom or behaviour exists does not necessarily mean that it has anything to do with culture in any real sense: it is easy to think of inferior customs and behaviours which in no way have been of any use to anyone and that are so disgusting that it is offensive that we should even have to sink to the level of having to refute them. A good example of this is the cruel, hideous, and despicable practice of “female circumcision”. And then there is the vast array of primitive superstitions and practices which one would have hoped the world had outgrown, but instead we see that there are religious fanatics who would have us return to the middle ages and even further back.

Historically, the most common scenario has been, obviously, that starting from a very early age, people have been indoctrinated with the culture, especially the religion, they happen to have been born into. Following that what has kept especially religion going is the threat of being denigrated as a traitor (“infidel”) if and when one begins to think for oneself and stand on one’s own two feet. Finally, there is the ultimate lurking threat of being despised as a coward if one doesn’t go along with whatever some (usually totally illegitimate) authority demands. These obscene lies—which have also kept most wars in the history of the world going—need to be vigorously exposed and refuted: it is of vital importance to clearly see that it is the religious fanatics who are the traitors, against humanity, and also, if there is a God, against God as well, there’s no question about that!

On the question of courage: it is obvious that this does not imply the absence of fear but rather the ability to overcome it, and it's equally obvious that if there were no "initial" fear to overcome there would be no courage (this of course does not imply that any time there is an overcoming of fear there is also courage, since the fear might have been totally disproportionate to the threat to start out with). The sort of "physical courage" that can be achieved simply through a process of brutalization does not therefore strike us as being what courage is in the truest sense; the "courage" displayed by barbaric hordes, to take an even more extreme example, is clearly inferior to that of civilized people on a high level of consciousness.

Still, we haven't really come any closer to the essence of courage, but fortunately for us, the Duc de La Rochefoucauld has, as usual, hit the nail on the head in his inimitable way with the following aphorism: "Perfect courage is to do without witnesses that which one could do when everyone is watching"(!)⁴ Apart from proving once again that he isn't fooled by pretense and pretension, the good old Duke (who had considerable combat experience, by the way) has very well identified the deep reality at the heart of courage which is that courage is to go it alone, and also, which I think is implied, to go it alone for a long period of time and on a high level of consciousness (in case anyone was wondering how this correlates with extremely intense forms of physical trial, for example torture, it goes without saying that there is an experience of time-dilation associated with them). One can also see that the Duc de La Rochefoucauld has managed to brilliantly sum up the humanistic instinct on what courage is and should be.

⁴ "La parfaite valeur est de faire sans témoins ce qu'on serait capable de faire devant tout le monde" (Maxime 216)

In contrast, everyone knows that religious fanatics are almost always weaklings and inferior types to start out with, insignificant nobodies unless attached to some group, and then when worked up into a frenzy no better than the barbaric hordes. It seems to me furthermore that fanaticism is latent in most religion since religion contains strong inducements for people to constantly repress their (perfectly natural and not at all immoral) doubts by becoming ever more “enthusiastic”, leading to an insane vicious circle. Alternatively, one could say that religion is supremely conducive to fanaticism: it somehow brings out any and all of the latent fanaticism in people. Finally, the type of courage displayed by full-blown religious fanatics (if and when displayed) certainly seems to be comparable to the insensitivity and obliviousness of people high on a combination of alcohol and drugs.

The net contribution to humanity of religion and religion-like political movements (all across the spectrum) has been overwhelmingly negative, anyone can see that. Almost every real advance has been despite them, not thanks to them. Not entirely, but to a totally unacceptable degree, they’ve managed to terrorize those who should have nothing to fear, and instead given “justification” to those who should have a whole lot to fear, damn it! Now the world itself is one big terrorist, there’s no doubt about that⁵—nothing was ever gained by pretending that things are better than they are—and so all religion and the religion-like political movements have done is to exacerbate the problem!

Earlier, we observed that the level of inherent unfairness of the world constituted a kind of “provocation” in that it could almost be seen as an indication that we were “meant” to suffer the slings and arrows of

⁵ How about the Black Death and the Spanish Flu, just for starters!

outrageous fortune, for some unknown reason. We then saw that religion had “inspired” a number of “solutions” to what this reason might be, solutions which were judged to be totally inadequate. One thing we know for sure, however, is that a provocation is something that cries out for a response, and humanity’s response should be to stand up and once and for all refuse to be terrorized.

APPENDIX

Note 1

There’s nothing “negative” about this statement—it’s simply a factual summary of the historical experience of most of humanity! If there’s something negative, it’s the posing and posturing very often connected with the trivial and misleading notion that it’s always good to “be positive”, a posing and posturing which amounts to nothing more nor less than an extremely irritating form of sanctimoniousness. In a great many cases the positive thing is to feel anger and defiance and to (try and) fight back against the whole way in which this existence is ordered. It’s also the most virile thing, and since when did sanctimoniousness correlate with virility—or any other virtue for that matter?!

Nobody’s denying that there are a lot of good things in life, the problem is that for the most part there is no reasonable relationship—nor can there be, given the way this existence is ordered—between what people put into life and what they get in return (this latter being in the large majority of cases too little but also, in the case of some grotesquely undeserving individuals, clearly way too much).

In the Lettres Philosophiques, Voltaire singled out for special praise John Dryden's great reflection on life, which is very much in the spirit of (life being) "an undignified mind game with a shadowy opponent" (page 1 this essay):

When I consider life, 'tis all a cheat,
 Yet, fooled with hope, men favor the deceit,
 Trust on, and think tomorrow will repay.
 Tomorrow's falser than the former day,
 Lies worse, and while it says we shall be blest
 With some new joys, cuts off what we possessed.
 Strange couzenage! None would live past years again,
 Yet all hope for pleasure in what yet remain;
 And from the dregs of life think to receive
 What the first sprightly running could not give.
 I'm tired with waiting for this chemic gold,
 Which fools us young and beggars us when old.

From: Aureng-Zebe (1675), Act IV, Scene I (Aureng-Zebe speaking)
 Regent's Drama Restoration Series (University of Nebraska 1971)
Editor's note: couzenage, line 4=deceit; chemic, line 11=false, counterfeit.

Voltaire's own translation of the portion running from "None would live" to "could not give" is also magnificent:

Nul de nous ne voudrait recommencer son cours:
 De nos premiers moments nous maudissons l'aurore,
 Et de la nuit qui vient nous attendons encore
 Ce qu'ont en vain promis les plus beaux de nos jours

(Lettres Philosophiques, Éditions Gallimard, 1986; page 127)

And then observe how feeble and inadequate Nourmahal's reply to Aureng-Zebe's speech is!

'Tis not for nothing that we life pursue;
It pays our hopes with something still that's new:
Each day's a mistress unenjoyed before;
Like travelers, we're pleased with seeing more.
Did you but know what joys your way attend,
You would not hurry to your journey's end.

The reply is certainly “positive”, the only problem is that it isn't a reply at all—it just mindlessly repeats the very position that Aureng-Zebe has just annihilated! (especially in the four lines which Voltaire has translated magnificently)

Note 2

Unless I'm very much mistaken, which I don't think I am, the film is Ingmar Bergman's attempt at some kind of “closure” with his parents, especially his father, who he had previously indirectly portrayed as a vicious tyrant in the film “Fanny and Alexander”: I say “indirectly” because although the film has fictitious characters it's no secret that it's based on his own life.

The title “Den Goda Viljan” means something like “Good Intentions”, and here Ingmar Bergman is clearly bending over backwards to give his father the “benefit of the doubt”...