

**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 put it mildly...) The more capricious adversity people overcome the more they find that life is a mere grind<sup>1</sup>, an undignified "mind game" with a shadowy opponent who is both everywhere and nowhere, and that this elusive antagonist is the world itself. Now it is often held that there is a "grandeur" in suffering, even that suffering is "holy", but these assertions have to be VERY HEAVILY QUALIFIED: by definition, the highest endeavour is to take on the world (the elusive antagonist) and the grandeur 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 we should remember that in humour there is a very significant element of aggressiveness of man against the world.

In Ingmar Bergman's film "Den Goda Viljan", 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

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix

his parents<sup>2</sup>) answers that “I don’t know if suffering cleanses us but I’ve seen many cases where suffering destroys and deforms”. Exactly! The answer is clearly a veiled criticism of 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, but only up to a point!--the important thing is to know that one CAN endure pain and suffering IF REQUIRED...of course one can never be really sure of this unless one has been faced with the real thing, but to go from this to the blanket claim that there is a simple one-to-one relationship between (enduring) suffering and greatness (and courage: more on this below!) and that’s all there is to it, must be wrong: we would then end up in an absurd situation where helping other people achieve greatness would mean torturing them round-the-clock, and conversely, attempting to alleviate the suffering of other people would be an outrageous and illicit interference in their natural right to experience great suffering and achieve maximum greatness.

In reality, of course, it’s always the best and bravest who take the hits on the (real) front line, both literally and figuratively, whereas certain individuals have a knack for 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 especially 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

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix

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 17<sup>th</sup>, 1999 in the Swedish 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, the problem then becoming 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). 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.

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 and civilized a society is, the more sophisticated, reliable and accurate are its methods of ensuring that there is some sort or reasonable relationship between the intrinsic, true long-term value an individual adds to society and what that individual receives in compensation, with some common sense bounds at either extreme.

Anyway, it's blindingly obvious that religion 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 this<sup>3</sup>. Not that it's illegitimate to be proud of one's achievements: everyone has the right—nay, the obligation!—to explain 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 and often very subtle and devious forms, and we should try to expose it, everywhere; for example: the fact that a certain custom or behaviour happens to have a long history 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 which one would have hoped the world had outgrown, but instead we see that there are religious nutters and/or people hiding behind religion who would have us return to the middle ages and even further back. An extreme example of such an inferior custom and behaviour is the cruel, hideous, and despicable practice of Female Genital Mutilation, which is so disgusting that it is offensive that we should even have to sink to the level of having to refute it.

Historically, the most common scenario has been 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 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

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<sup>3</sup> In practice, of course, the extent to which this law applies varies widely

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 courage 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 the courage 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"(!)<sup>4</sup> 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 psychological truth 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.

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<sup>4</sup> "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. Put a little differently, religion is supremely conducive to fanaticism: it has a way of bringing 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 individuals 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 that<sup>5</sup> (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!

## 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

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<sup>5</sup> Just look at history!

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?!

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 (line7)=deceit; chemic (line11)=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'on 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 portrayed as a vicious tyrant in the film “Fanny and Alexander”. 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”

