

# **On the Morphing of Philosophy**

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## I

What traces of philosophy, if any, may it still be desirable to keep after philosophy has had a good morphing? There would remain a sturdy place in what has been morphed into what, for example, as Isaiah Berlin, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Osvaldo Boyer, Perry Anderson, Tariq Ali, David Harvey and Michel Foucault have written—whether we want to call what they do or did philosophy or not. But that is certainly not how they, Berlin perhaps aside, would be labelled. But aren't activities that these public intellectuals engaged in a good replacement of philosophy? And are not activities like these becoming such a replacement, and a good one, day by day? Isn't a normatively sensitive political economy, social anthropology and history a good thing? And indeed a good replacement? Hasn't philosophy had its day?

Reading the people mentioned above and people like them leads me to reflect on some things that brought me to philosophy in the first place and that I believe should continue to have our attention no matter what the morphing process or, for that matter, the lack thereof. But what I am about to talk about is something that for me was way prior to the articulation and defense of a so-called or sometimes so-called meta-philosophy or of therapeutic philosophy to dissolve philosophy, Wittgenstein-style or my anti-philosophy

*tout court* style (Nielsen 2015a; 2015b; 2015c). Those activities ignore and fail to give good reasons to believe that all the issues that initially brought me to philosophy should be set aside, that they should be ignored and put in the dustbin of history. I refer to the kind of philosophical endeavors or, if you will, just careful reflective fact-sensitive endeavors that I shall discuss here. I no longer think reflections on these matters, important as they are, require philosophical investigations or could profit much, if at all, from philosophical analysis or defense. But these questions may all the same haunt us and whether they haunt us or not they remain, and not just as puzzles, something that needs to be considered and answered to if we are ever to attain a humanizing of our world (though we may not, of course). That they are reflected on and, if possible, cogently is vital whether they are regarded as philosophical matters or not. That they are or are not to be so regarded is not the crucial question to ask and perhaps not even a useful question. But that they be carefully and reflectively practiced is. (Such careful and reflective regarding is not the exclusive or even the predominate property of philosophy. But it is part of philosophy.)

Again and again many people try to make sense of their lives, try to ascertain whether it can even have sense. Whether rationally or non-rationally, life may be what Shakespeare wrote of when he spoke of life being all sound and fury signifying nothing? We, now speaking collectively, try to understand our world and some of us with that understanding try to help in changing it for the better even if that changing it for the better will only make a little less beastly, the beastliness that in reality obtains. Beastliness is grandly alive in our world. But I am not saying we are all beastly or that kindness is an illusion. Not all of us are beastly and kindness is not an illusion. But throughout history, again and again, we are far closer

to perpetual war than to perpetual peace. And that is not alone among our recurrent disasters.

Perhaps we can speak with cogency and come to get some cognitive grip on of the very idea of a way of life that may properly be lived. (Certainly Ronald Dworkin thought so.) But not *the* way of life; that is preposterous and perhaps unwittingly arrogant as well. But we may very well get a grip on *a* way of life that is about how collectively to live together in ways our lives should be lived morally, politically and socially that is something not to be set aside. What we need to have a grip on, at least to some extent, is how to be in key with our how our lives should be ordered or, if you will, lived. We are not at a loss to understand what it would be like for there to be a decent society where human flourishing would obtain for many people and where there would be a genuine opportunity for all in a way it is not now. But that is so nowhere in the world, though some places are plaining worse than others. Things go better in Oslo or Stockholm than in Cairo or Mexico City. This is so even between different places in developed cultures. Things are very different in Iceland than in Saudi Arabia. Even significantly different in Sweden than in the United States and not to the United States' advantage. All of that in spite of what Obama emphatically said in his final address to the nation.

We can, however, have some understanding of what this decency is and what its flourishing would be like without knowing or understanding how it could even come to obtain or how it once did obtain but no longer does. Remember the passenger pigeon. Moreover, we can understand how it could have come to actually obtain in our lives, again without at all going philosophical. Our very descriptions of what would be decency and human flourishing may not match how the world actually is. A photographer or painter may,

by how they photograph or paint, fashion and indeed give a false depiction of the situation. So could a novelist, a short story writer, or a playwright give a false or misleading depiction of the situation. Moreover, we can come to know what something is without knowing *why* it is or *how* it came to be that way. We can actually know that a plant or a human died by having a certain sort of description of a plant or human that they are dead without knowing why or how they died. Accurate description is one thing; a correct causal explanation is another, though if we see a description or photo of a decapitated human being we will know that person is dead or that the description is that of a dead person.

A false, indeed a near to utterly false, but still a clearly meaningful description could be given. It could be intelligible as what would count as an empirical description and still be false, even obviously false, but an intelligible description describing what could empirically be the case still need not be the case. It could be intelligible of what would count as an adequate explanation of why it is the case that is distinct from a description that it is the case. Intelligible descriptions are one thing; *true* descriptions are another. A true description must, of course, be intelligible. But an intelligible description need not be a statement of truth. 'She procrastinated' could be the case but it need not be. 'The house drinks procrastination' is neither true nor intelligible. Indeed, it could not be true for it is not intelligible.

A putative description of the world clearly expressed may or may not answer to how things actually are. But for our descriptions to so answer to the world that we want and need to know about it is not at all sufficient, though necessary, that we have a meaningful description. Being an empirically meaningful description is one thing; being a true one is another. 'Obama lost the 2012 election' is an empirically intelligible remark, but a plainly

false one. 'Obama ran from Boston to Denver in a minute' is an empirically meaningful sentence but obviously an absurdly false one. But it is empirically meaningful all the same as 'Obama is a round square' is not. It is simply unintelligible. While 'Obama is a socialist' can be saying something empirically intelligible but highly unlikely in spite of what not a few Republicans routinely say. If someone said it one could reasonably assume that they were Tea Party befogged, ideologically severely twisted or deeply uninformed. But such sayers and believers are alive and kicking and saying something intelligible but unreasonable in saying 'Obama speaks Arabic fluently' or that 'The communists will win a riding in Quebec in the 2015 election'. In that way clarity is not enough. We need to understand that ideological claims can be grossly false but still be plainly intelligible. And for some, perhaps sometimes for many, they will be catching and persuasive. Keep in mind some responses of Trump. What we should aim at is not just intelligibility but truth, or at least warranted assertability. Truth or even warranted assertability in politics is infrequent, but very humanly important. Not all clear descriptions add up to depicting matters that actually stand or even that it is reasonable to expect they will stand. It is often the case that ideology rides high and distinctively so. We not infrequently get falsity dressed up to look good. Don Quixotes need their Sancho Panzas.

We can understand all this notwithstanding and still not make any philosophical investigations at all. We need no philosophical assumptions to know what could be the case here or at issue here. But we need to be suspicious of what is blared out at us. Half an hour watching TV commercials will do this for me. There is nothing here that counts in any way as a philosophical investigation. There is nothing that counts as philosophical here or that requires philosophical thought or investigation or engaging in philosophical activity,

argument, reflection or reasoning or having any philosophical background at all, including assumptions. There is nothing in such situations that involves engaging in any way in anything philosophical.

Still, there need not be something like that that philosophers need to be involved in or with when they are doing philosophy. Something that they strive for, take as their task, be intrigued by or take interest in in a philosophical way or are committed to as a philosophical difficulty or characterize as involving one in philosophical activity. (Except perhaps sometimes the subject of philosophical reflection.) Something that distinctively counts as a philosophical endeavor. Some say that to be anti-philosophical is to be negatively philosophical and that, if we are reflective, there is no way of escaping philosophy. All that is actually invoked if we do philosophy are some trivial in reality artificial matters that philosophers muddle themselves with. Philosophers standardly unwittingly artificially produce puzzles which they then try to un-puzzle as if they were deep things to resolve. There are actually not actual problems but just artificial puzzles that philosophers like to play around with. To construct language-games that some people play. Not genuine problems at all; not genuine questions at all.

I have in mind such matters as trying to ask whether we can *know* that time is real, know that there is an external world, whether sense data have a back side, whether solipsism is true. Some philosophers kid themselves into thinking that in engaging in philosophical investigations sometimes they may engage us in such activities. Philosophy requires, as Friedrich Waismann thought, vision and profound insight. Others would say rather considerable powers of philosophical disillusion. The philosophical capacity and willingness to bring philosophy to an end; to, that is, to its termination. This, as Wittgenstein gives to

understand, is what it is to do philosophy properly. It is, if you will, its task. Indeed a negative task that enables us, and helpfully, to leave philosophy.

If we actually can un-puzzle some of these puzzles we have, as some philosophers believe, made considerable philosophical progress. These puzzles will have come to be recognized as metaphysical puzzles and as thus actually non-questions. Something that is endemic to metaphysics. The very idea of metaphysical investigations is a non-starter. What we actually have here is not an actual investigation. What we are actually doing is messing around by unwittingly making puzzles for ourselves, and usually for some others as well. Something, if we pay careful attention to the actual use of our language, of how our linguistic practices work and where we see how we get ourselves blocked in their use, we will recognize that we actually have pseudo-questions here rooted in our confusion about our uses of language.

Instead of confronting issues that are the problem of life we are just messing around with our language use, usually in places where philosophers puzzle themselves. We think we have deep problems about the world, problems that neither science nor religion can resolve, while we have just unwittingly blocked ourselves about how our linguistic practices actually work.

What is actually going on here is not that we are actually making investigations. What we are actually doing, where we do not engage in nonsense, is debunking and therapizing philosophy away. The way we do this is by getting a de-mythologizing view of how our linguistic practices work. We end up by de-mythologizing our conceptual puzzles about what Wittgenstein called our language-games. Friedrich Waismann, once Wittgenstein's brilliant student, came to think that philosophy where properly done was vision while

Wittgenstein thought that properly done ‘philosophical investigations’ therapized philosophy away. I am arguing that it was Wittgenstein who was on the mark and not Waismann. Or, more cautiously, that this is probably so, though Waismann certainly was nobody’s fool.

To shift a bit, in our world inequality is increasing. It has gained as capitalist societies have and continue to develop, though just how it goes has various forms as our extant societies vary in our complex contemporary world. It is often thought that in corrupt and/or deceptive forms these inequalities, with their damaging effects, continue to develop. We are often taught that is just the way it must be. It just goes with modernity. But more and more modernity has compensating values that we, some think, should accept as life enhancing. But it is often thought that we should recognize that capitalist society, though threatened, still generally is thought to be the best of several rotten deals. This is commonly thought to be, in much—far too much in my view—an integral and indeed an empirically necessary part of the developed world.

Extensively growing inequalities are increasing, passed on by inheritance. That is how contemporary capitalism increasingly works. A ‘self-made person’ (usually a man) is becoming mythological instead of just an increasingly rare variety. Perhaps, very perhaps, they are on their way to extinction. The rich get richer and the poor poorer is just a feature of our present lives. But it has been so for a long time. Inheritance, as Thomas Piketty well contends, is a large part of it. It is a structural part of contemporary societies. But it is not something to write home about. But it is just the way things are going for good structural reasons.



Our world is not an attractive world. But we cannot, or at the very least should not, try to go back to earlier modes of life. We do not have to set aside modernity as something we are caught or enmeshed in, but that does not mean that we must be caught in those capitalist modes or forms of life. It need not be the case that capitalist modes of life constitute something in which in our time we must continue to live. That that is just our fate. Modes of life have changed before and it is at least arguably the case that they are in for change now. Indeed, it is the case that our modes of life are in for a deep change now. Something we are increasingly coming to recognize. The capitalist system is broken.

To try to junk modernity *holus bolus* is absurd and actually impossible. And we cannot, or at least should not, go back to earlier modes of life. We do not have to set aside modernity. But that does not mean we are caught by those capitalist forms of life. But they, we should recognize, are strong in invasive effect on our lives under capitalism. Moreover, we should be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. But that does not at all mean that we are trapped by capitalism; that we just accept it as something that must be in our time and that is how our life must go in a complex modern society and to try to escape it is futile.

We need to see what goes on in our complex modern developed societies. I see, for example, more and more beggars and more and more homeless and more and more searching in garbage cans as I walk in my neighborhood in Montreal. I also discovered last winter a homeless person had slept outside against the wall of our house. These are evidence of what a wonderful world we have. My neighborhood is not exceptional in Montreal, but rather a typical former working class neighborhood that is increasingly being gentrified. And Montreal is not exceptional among North American cities and in some respects among cities

in the developed world. It is certainly not as slummed as Johannesburg or Detroit. But in most cities of the developed societies near crushing inequalities are becoming widespread. This to some extent is so even in Stockholm which is much better off than Montreal or Lisbon or more places. One can on occasion see Roma beggars on the streets there, though not many. But still they are still visibly there in Stockholm begging in their strange clothes. Still, Stockholm is a realistic model of something nearer to equality and general wellbeing as one is likely to get anywhere under contemporary conditions. But even there the wellbeing is not for all. Moreover, inequality and poverty are steadily rising throughout the world and it cannot be so easily overcome as Jeffrey Sachs believes and Obama seems at least to assume. Without a lot more equality than we have now people will not have nearly a fair shake or stake in their lives. For that we need a far deeper equality but equality does not even get on the public radar of many of our societies. It, Obama to the contrary, does not mess with the capitalist system.

Twenty years after World War II it may have seemed to many of us that our nation states were moving in the direction of equality. But since the 1970s there has been a steadily growing inequality and misery. This has become the new normal. Thatcher and Reagan pushed it along with the theoretical backing of Hayek and Friedman. The inequality steamboat with an orchestra on the deck singing "The Virtues of Selfishness" while that disastrous steamboat went right on chugging along full steam ahead. The New Deal Days are over.

There are some common kernels of decency in our modern developed culture but those kernels were not sufficient, not strong enough, to make anything like a common cultural basis for wellbeing and an equality for human flourishing. There is less and less of

a welfare state to help along. Led now by the United States, de-welfarism has become the name of the game. Social welfare gradually developed, however, it has not become sufficient in the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, France, Spain or Italy for decency to obtain. Not, that is, even sufficient enough to make life generally decent in these and other countries. Still, there are degrees of indecency. Haiti and Ethiopia are one thing; Iceland and the Netherlands are another. Indecency isn't shared out equally. Still, in all societies, even worse there are some common threads of decency but they are not enough to constitute a universally accepted or acceptable conception of a decent world.

The very conception of a decent way to live and of good life may well be a will-o'-the-wisp, especially when we try to translate it into the concrete. To try, that is, to make the welfarist conceptualization into something more than just platitudes or banalities with different concreteness. None of these platitudes or banalities are of sufficient substance to give weight to what would be a decent way of life, to say nothing of a good way of life that will make for human flourishing. I am not saying that there are no decent people or that there are only a few. They are many. I see it in the concrete in their actions. I see it in their treatment of me, a rather decrepit old man now. People without my asking go out of their way to help me. Yesterday, for example, as I was returning home from a walk and was trying to get my walker up my front steps when the recycling truck came along. I heard the crush of the materials being dumped from the bins into the truck behind me and then suddenly the driver of the recycling truck was behind me and offering to take my walker up the stairs for me. He must have been stressed as he rushed to finish his route, but he made the time and took the effort to help me. Things like that happen to me repeatedly. The so-called 'selfish

gene' must frequently malfunction. People are not saints, but they are not beast or normally uncaring either.

## II

Perhaps we should be more cautious than I am being here about claiming all philosophical question, or at least all metaphysical or epistemological questions, are pseudo problems or at least 'unanswerable problems or questions'. Something we shouldn't bother our heads about. But at least since Socrates, Plato and Aristotle we have had the problem or the question of truth. That certainly does not *seem* to be a pseudo problem or otherwise a problem to be set aside. It also does not seem like something, if we are even somewhat enlightened, to be set aside with a skeptical and rather indifferent shrug. To ask what is truth is not like 'asking' whether there is an external world or whether there are chimps in Montana or bluebirds in the Northwest Territories or whether there are physicists or philosophers who are natives of equatorial countries. Yet the question 'What is truth?' is not a straightforward empirical question as the above questions are. It is also not just a linguistic question either. 'Truth' is an English word just as 'God' is an English word. And this is a linguistic matter. As there may be no God so 'truth' is an English word and truth may be an illusion, though not so obviously as God is or as Santa Claus is. Once we needed philosophical argumentations to give us good reasons to believe there is no God or to be skeptical about it or, like Aquinas, to be a skilled believer. Now it is less seemingly evident that God exists. Skepticism has been around and alive at least since the Ancient Greeks, though there and then it was thought there were gods, not God.

God or the gods or neither in what used to be called primitive tribes, that is, non-literate tribes, there were always some people who would not sit around the tribal campfire or only did so out of fear of how they might be treated if they did not or did out of indifference because of fear of having a somewhat different mindset than was the thing done in their tribe. They didn't go with the flow there or perhaps anywhere. This makes the question of truth a real question not just or only because it is a philosophical puzzle like whether time is real. It is often as evident as to what is true or false, as that it is often plainly the case that a person is dead or that a person is an infant or that it has snowed or that there is a river there or what a person believes. The water is muddy. There is evidence for these matters that is often perfectly decisive. But there are no philosophical issues here.

But it is more problematic if we ask more generally and consider universally 'What is truth?', or at least seemingly so. It has been said that truth is what is so, what answers to reality, what corresponds to reality, what answers to our interests, what is universally believed, what is not intelligibly deniable, what is warrantably assertible. But these responses themselves are as contestable as what truth is. Consider a pragmatic favorite warranted assertability. Perhaps we can only justifiably believe that something is true when something is warrantably assertible. But something that is not warrantably assertible may still be true and something that is warrantably assertible may be something that is false, though we could not be justified in believing that it was false. And what is it to believe that something is so, that something corresponds to reality or answers to what is still may be false. Aren't these matters as contestable and often rather arbitrarily over many things that have the same problems that truth has? Do we have a universal sense, a universal consensus, concerning what is so or what is the case? Though *if* something is so or is the case it is true.

There seem, however, to be issues here that are *not* hothouse or contrived and without contrived answers or are non-artificial. Is not philosophy here alive and well and not a candidate for being pseudo-philosophical, a candidate for nonsense? Yet 'What is truth?' answers are indeterminate or empty such as saying truth is what corresponds to reality. Where we get more determinate we are without universal or even near universal non-vacuous consent. Moreover, our putative 'universal consent' is banal and even so without universal consent. We are as much puzzled about 'What corresponds to reality?' as we are puzzled about 'truth'. We are there going round and round in a circle of emptiness and banality. To say what is true is to say what is so and again this leaves us with emptiness. To say what is so is of no help if we are puzzled about truth. Either way, we are perplexed. How, if at all, have we made an advance? We are left wondering how we determine what is so. What is going on here is indeterminate and opaque. Without gaining in universal consensus from those who are not content with platitudes it does not help nor does it help to say that truisms can be true. *Such* consensus, if it obtains, is of no use. What are we to say here? Is such a question of true also an artificial problem that it is well to set aside?

Is it evident that human beings should set these problems aside or should proclaim them as pseudo problems? For a world of kindness, justice and mutual respect and equality to obtain and be sustained, we do not need philosophy. Philosophy has rather come not infrequently to get in the way. Cool commonsense informed critical reflection will do the job. What Peirce called critical commonsensism. We should as clearly as we can come to understand what a decent world would look like and we must as well have some understanding of and ability to articulate how such a world could be brought about and sustained, realizing full well that it is something that is scant on the ground now and we

never have had and very likely never will. But that does not mean that we should not struggle to attain it or to at least get some distance from the hell we have now.

We must at least understand what such a decent world would look like and we need as well to have some understanding of and ability to articulate how such a world could be brought about. Not just as a dream of such a world or a cooked up utopia, but how it could be brought about. Clear coherent description is not enough. We need as well to understand how a causal account of such a world could be obtained. To have that ability and to plausibly articulate such a world, including an articulation of how to sustain it. We need not just a clear description but a sound causal explanation. This gives us the means to a world that at least has some family resemblance to decency. With that we should struggle not only for that but for a good truly human world.

We need, indeed, to realize full well that it is something we do not have now and may never have. But that there could be one is a coherent task and not a dream of a spirit sayer. We must, that is, come to have some sense of how our societies, or at least some of them, could come to be changed from the hell we have now and have had for a long time and how to change at least some of them and hopefully all of them to something that is at least decent. More than that, hopefully, but at least that.

It is too quietist to just say we can show that metaphysical responses are nonsensical and remain content with some clearing of the decks. Still, much quite legitimate inquiry should bypass trying to give a precise account of truth and not to ignore people (including philosophers) who are concerned with the human condition and with whether a better world is possible and to escape from ideology without providing a philosophical account of truth which itself was non-ideological. While analytical accounts of truth from Tarski on are

non-ideological, such analytical accounts have not been caught up with pseudo problems and they have been somewhat useful as well. Still, it is clear that problems about the human condition, about human life, are more important than engaging in an analysis of truth. We can without getting into philosophy stick with banality—with truisms that are true—by saying what is true is what is the case. A nice banality that does no harm. Or we can as well get along with another truism that is also true, namely to say that what is true is what is so. Why do we need more in trying to get an understanding of what is a good life, a good human life, and what a good human condition would be and how to obtain it?

### III

To return to our considerations concerning the prerequisites for a decent society. We should come to understand and be able to articulate what is the case and sometimes has to be the case, to what it is that is achievable, and what has to be achieved for there to be a decent world or even at least as a minimal achievement for there to be an ending of the hell that is there for so much of our world and for so many people. We should struggle to end that hell and all hells (there are indeed many). Our actual world is plainly hellish, Obama optimism notwithstanding. We should recognize, however, that it is more of a hell in some parts of the world than in others. It is, for example, more of a hell in Damascus or Cairo than in Stockholm or Amsterdam. However, it is not enough merely to have an idea here, even a clear and forceful idea, of how things would have to be for here to be a decent world. We need also to have an understanding of what would make for a more decent existence and how it could be achieved. Looking out of the window of the café I am working in I can see a beggar on the other side of the street. It reminds me of the inhumanity of this wonderful



world we are living in, even in Canada, the country that our former Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, foolishly claimed as the best place in the world to be. Reflective Canadians can only be embarrassed by this bit of absurd propaganda. It matches the Prime Minister of Israel (2015).

We, of course, have some notion of what it would be like for our society to be decent. We have somewhat of a good sense of what would count toward making our societies decent worldwide. We also have a good sense of the atrocities going on around us which makes for widespread indecency. We see the atrocities on the internet and television almost every day, even when it is not part of our own lives. We may be lucky enough to live reasonably. But not most of our fellow beings and probably not anyone twenty years down the road with climate change. I look at little children with dread for them. I said once to my next door neighbor as we were chatting on our front steps as some children happily passed by us on the sidewalk, 'I wonder whether they will live as long as I have and what it will be like for them?' She replied bitterly, 'They won't live that long!' As I asked that question, that really was bitterly on my mind, along with the also bitter and angry thought that this could have unnecessary.

It is all too often just ignored or accepted passively as being just the ways things must be. The world is not replete with rose gardens. We must take this to heart and to head. We can cry out repeatedly that Black lives matter but still the bad treatment of Blacks goes on with killings and deprivations and lack of respect and concern with the police acting as brutes. Bad treatment rules the day. This stupid and evil treatment of Blacks has gone on in the United States for a long time. Brutalities occur almost daily including murders and brutalization by police officers. We must fight to end this and to not, as we so often do, let

police officers who carry out such abuses off the hook. This is not a society that respects the rule of law. We must bring racist America to an end. We must have a society where Black lives really do matter and not just as a bit of pious rhetoric. We must not pussy-foot around this rather than taking the matter in hand to protect Black lives and to achieve a situation where this just goes as a matter of course. There must be a fundamental change of society away from its racist ways. I remember from my youth where the racist signs were more overt than they are now, not only in South Africa but in the United States. Though that is gone now, racism remains alive and well but takes more devious forms. It gets thinly disguised. But the police are still hard at work.

However, we do not have a clear idea of how to end racism and to make our society and indeed the world really thoroughly non-racist. We must not become quietists resigning ourselves to the belief that it is inevitable and resignedly accepting the status quo. To do so in effect is to irrationally and evasively kid ourselves into believing things are getting better. We must fight this relentlessly. If saying this be moralism, so be it.

As even as this is it is overshadowed (to put it mildly) by what is going on with ISIS's incredibly savage and brutal behavior with Saudi Arabia (America's ally) minor league copy-cattings. ISIS's brutal and murderous attacks in one place or another are becoming almost a daily occurrence. Sometimes on the same day. Some days it is a dual or even a triple event. It is widely and obviously rightly deplored. But no one seems to know how to end it.

Even where we have decency, as some of us do, it is only for the few and we certainly do not have a decent social order. Particularly a world order. We have never had that for all in any society. Some communists dreamed of it and some of us, communist or not, thought we had the key to the change. Some thought, for example, in the early years of the Soviet

Union that they had found the key by which a decent society and indeed a world for all could eventually be achieved. That obviously did not succeed even anywhere then but that is not to say it could not succeed. The time and social conditions were not right as Rosa Luxembourgh saw. Perhaps if things had been managed differently in the Soviet Union it might have succeeded; it was not necessarily unachievable. But that is very questionable. But it might have been approximate-able. But we should point out that we have never had it for any society, let alone for the world. *Perhaps* we came the closest to it in hunting and gathering societies or at least some of them. But I believe that is a romantic conception that will not withstand scrutiny. Are we in effect hunting for a Shangri-La?

There is no place in the world where each is to count for one and none to count for more than one. For this to obtain sounds like and very probably is a dream world. We have never had such a society or anything that approximated it. But there has been a lot of rhetoric. Has there even been much of an approximation? Stockholm comes a little closer to it than Cairo. But without denying this, reflect on who cleans the welfare state in Stockholm or any place else in Sweden (Cavanas 2010). Equality is a distant, perhaps an impossible, ideal.

There is no reign or even near reign of equality. That would make Nietzsche joyous for equality is something he detested. But without some measure of equality decency is drastically incomplete. Fairness requires it as John Rawls recognized, but we have not much of it. In most places decency is in short supply. We cannot have, Nietzsche to the contrary notwithstanding, decency, not to speak of fairness and justice, with masters and slaves, nobles and commoners, working class people and underclass people, middleclass people and lower class working people, the *übermenschen* and the rest.. Where there are such divisions,

depending on the degree yielding, either no decent society or a society with a deficiency in decency, there is a society where at best fairness is undermined. However it is characterized, we have a bad place. All our societies in some degree and in some way are so infected. Decency does not ride high. For examples, consider India with its caste system, Indonesia burning up as a result of greed, the United States with its racism where Black lives do not matter, Britain with its class system and stupid and expensive system of royalty, Nazi Germany with its hatred of Jews and its dictatorship, Israel with its hatred of Moslems, and do not forget the hatred of Sunnis in Saudi Arabia for Shiites and the hatred of Buddhists for Moslems in Myanmar. Canada is not exempt with its treatment of First Nations' people, particularly women. The world is rather scantily planted with decent societies. We hardly have any societies that can rightly be called decent, though some are worse than others. And some are close to being instantiations of decency. Sweden, for example. 'Decency' does not have zero denotation.

Moreover, inequality is more widespread than it once was. To say things are going better now (2015-16) is a stupid joke. Obama should be ashamed. The rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer. This is the reality of our world. But Obama goes on about how great the United States is and that things would go well if people would be a little more reasonable. It will take a lot more than that. It will take a deep, very deep, change not only in the United States but in the world. But is it anywhere on the agenda?

#### IV

Consider, to be more specific, another case where we have political and moral issues that arguably needs no philosophical articulation or foundation. *Pace* Hillary Clinton, there

is no *indispensable* nation, the way of life, the model civilization or chosen people that is the model of excellence for humankind and suited to rule the world and provide the model for all nations to follow. Many citizens of the United States, in effect following Clinton, think that their country is it. But, as Noam Chomsky well points out, that is not the way much of the rest of the world views things. Obama is ethnocentric. The United States is not the envy or even model of the world. It is only in propaganda or illusion that any country is believed to be the indispensable nation and its citizens are taken to be the chosen people. I would rather live in Sweden than in the United States or, for that matter, Canada. But I would not hold for a minute that Sweden or anywhere else is the indispensable nation or that the Swedish people or any other people were the chosen people. But where we can get a common kernel of decency or a near to common kernel we sometimes get truisms such as mutual reciprocity. But these alleged common kernels, even if they were pan-humanly adhered to kernels, are not sufficient to provide *a* way, let alone *the* way, of life for all humanity. And even their commonness is subject to various understandings. Cultural diversity runs very deep.

Moreover, there is no *the* way of life for all humanity. There are instead many ways of life. Some of the various ones are decent and some not. But even if kindness and mutual respect were common kernels pan-humanly adhered to, they have not been sufficient to provide *the* way of life for all humanity. Common kernels are not sufficient for there being a substantive cross-cultural universal morality or for establishing that there is a *the* way of life politically and morally. There are, rather, many ways of life whose shared kernels do not constitute or signify a universal substantive moral and political account of how the world is to be ordered. There is no consensus about that. In fact, it is unfortunately compatible with brutal disputes and conflicts. 'A brutal way of life' is not a contradiction but it is a horror.

And there have been plenty of horrors and still are. We remain without consensus, even arguable a rational consensus, on what would constitute a decent way of living. To say nothing of *the* way of living. This, of course, does not make me jump with joy but unfortunately it is so.

We have some moral truisms and moral banalities. Still, that does not justify setting them aside for truisms or banalities can be true for all of that. They as well as claimed natural laws or natural rights or natural law theories or natural rights theories and their articulations or matters close to that can be acceptable. These can be held without recourse. They are grounded in truisms or banalities. They do not require philosophy or theology or anything like that.

I believe that the above notwithstanding it is important that there are some non-insignificant common kernels, though they will go with considerable differences in conception about how life should be lived. There are significant differences concerning what would be an optimal way of living, let alone *the* way of living, if there is such a thing. Where we are concerned with human flourishing, not just looked at individually or for particular people, but for collective flourishing for all people, including people with whom we, as individuals or members of a specific culture, have only in a broad sense some relationship should be held in respect and be an object of our concern. I speak of people from afar with whom we have no direct relationship and little understanding. Indeed we should go further. This should also apply to all people where each should count for one and none count for more than one. There must, of course, be no chosen people. There should be no one who counts for more because they are a certain people who are given special privileges or powers.

However, it is unfortunately easy to be dismissive here and even cynical, perhaps bitterly so, about the matters I have just been discussing. The skepticism I am expressing here often carries with it cynicism but it does not with me, though it does carry a certain sadness. And it is not unreasonable to be pessimistic here as well. Our societies have never been places where human beings, except for a lucky few, flourish. They have never been places where each is to count as one and none is to count for more than one. Instead, we have something quite different. Instead of flourishing we have a world of not infrequent horrors. I share some of Primo Levi's sense of and feelings for this. Horrors abound, though we frequently stick our heads in the sand about this. We all too frequently live in a state of denial. But with all the horrors of war, including the flight from it, we have a world replete with brutalities and other horrors. Think also of global warming and what it threatens—perhaps by now makes inevitable. Look for political horror at Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, South Sudan, North Sudan and the list goes on and on. All of these matters are devastatingly lethal. We are enmeshed in one way another by these evils. But most of us live in a state of denial. Only infrequently, if at all, will we look it in the face. We are not cognitive of the depth of our irrationality. It certainly seems to me to be very deep. Brutal killing widely spread seems at least to be endemic to human beings. We are too often inclined towards war. It always seemed to me that the two world wars would have taught us a lesson, but apparently it has not. Our societies are generally not conducive to wellbeing. We are good at engaging in senseless war and just as good at denial. Some societies at some times are worse than others. Most societies are not big on respect for human life and human wellbeing. Kindliness is often curtailed, though people typically have those they favor and those they do not and some they would like to stamp out or will have

no concern for except perhaps as tools of labor. This often goes with the irrational belief that those who do badly deserve their fate. Ideology, as is usually the case, rides high.

## V

Many people have thought and are thinking about how to make our world a little better and some struggle to make it so, or at least to make it a little less horrible, but to little avail. There is nothing like a consensus about the road or roads to be taken or that can be taken. Just the opposite. This becomes abundantly obvious if we get at all cross-cultural or detailed. I do not say that there could be no sound arguments about what is to be done. But in fact there is nothing like consensus if we get a little detailed. And there is little prospect of there being a response to what is to be done that leads us in the direction of human flourishing or a world of kindness and human concern.

There are rising inequalities both *within* societies and *between* societies. By now 1% of the world's population owns 48% of the world's wealth. *Perhaps, very perhaps, if we all* had some extensive wealth worldwide that would not matter so much, but as a matter of fact great swaths of our populations worldwide live miserably and another great swath fare badly with things for them getting worse. And few have much of a say about how our lives should go in spite of all our talk about democracy. It seems to me both obviously and urgently important to sort this out (as philosophers often say) and to pervasively right this if we can. Philosophy has not been a big league player here and there is little prospect that it will be. But can we, philosophers or not, get a good cognitive grip, or even any cognitive grip, on how this is to be done? Clearly it is a problem globally. But for it to be done in Europe, North America, and most of South America, not so speak of Indonesia and China, it



is evident. Indeed, it is for much of the world. We know *something* of what needs to be done, but we have a poor understanding of how to do it. It is easy—all too easy—to despair. There is hell in one way or another almost everywhere. How do we make the Central African Republic more like Sweden or the Netherlands? And even then, if we ask who cleans the welfare state in Sweden, we will not jump with joy (Gavanas 2010).

I have in my recent writings been very critical of philosophy and of the ability of philosophers to get a critical grip on such matters. It is true that where philosophy is treated as a humanistic discipline or activity it is centrally concerned with ways of life and with how societies should be ordered and with gaining a sense of what a humanly viable world would be like. So all may not be lost. Moreover, Derek Parfit, Allen Wood, T. M. Scanlon, Onora O'Neill and Christine Korsgaard, all imminent mainstream analytic philosophers, have in various ways with considerable cogency sought to make some advance here. The results have been diverse and very problematic. Raymond Geuss, who brilliantly goes his own way, makes some more progress here. He is impressive with his deep and subtle historicism and philosophical skepticism. He adeptly avoids the roads usually taken. Pierre Hadot, a subtle and able historian of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, tackles the kind of problems I was initially concerned with when I first came to philosophy. *Some* of the hermeneutists, such as Hans Georg Gadamer and Gianni Vattimo, do so as well though with inadequate clarity. Stuart Hampshire and Bernard Williams, with their conception of philosophy as a humanistic discipline, have some serious things to say about these matters, namely about how we both individually and collectively should live.

As I grow older and the inevitability of death comes closer I return more persistently to these matters, though with various degrees of intensity and understanding they have

always been with me since my youth. I remain skeptical here, much more so than earlier in my life, but without a whiff of either *nihilism* or *quietism*. Concerning the latter, I do not side with Wittgenstein, Rorty or Parfit. I now think that particularly in the situations which we human animals are in that there are better things to do than to philosophize, even if we do philosophy as a humanistic discipline or activity. It is particularly important for we intellectuals to take this to head and to heart and still not be just neutral observers of the actual. Wittgenstein had a sense of this when he wanted, utterly unrealistically, to go to the Soviet Union to dig, that is, to work as an ordinary laborer as he had, though more realistically, worked as a hospital orderly in London during World War II. I am not, of course, suggesting that a humanistic philosophical activity is nonsense, in error, banal or frivolous. It is none of these things. But there are far better things, far more urgently crucial things, to be done in the world we live in than doing philosophy, even in the humanistic mode as a humanistic discipline.

Even if there is something properly called philosophy as a humanistic discipline, there are things that are much more humanly demanding and more useful and indeed things that are also intellectually challenging. (I do not deny that philosophy can be intellectually challenging as well. It often is. And it is, as Hilary Putnam remarks, also hard if properly engaged in. If our situation were different, I would bury myself in it.) But as things are, there are other things that should demand our engagement instead. The activities of climate change activists are an obvious example. Being investigative journalists like George Monbiot, Glen Greenwald or Chris Hedges is another. Or what Noam Chomsky is when he is not doing linguistics is another. (I do not suggest his doing linguistics is unimportant. It certainly is important.) These are key examples of activities that are more humanly desirable and useful

than anything philosophical we can do. The same is so for much, but not all, social scientific activity.

There are many people young, middle aged and old aged, indeed even aged, on the streets trying to change our wretched world into something at least marginally better. For them, and many like them, public intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky, George Monbiot, Glen Greenwald, Chris Hedges and once Edmund Said are or were great inspirations and a help where they can get extensively noted. But there are powerful forces trying to keep this from happening. Resisting this is what such public intellectuals are doing and is crucial in a way that philosophical activity is not. Though we should remember Simone Weil, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertand Russell were useful in the same way but again not *qua* philosophers. This was strikingly evident in Russell's case.

If we look at philosophy historically, as well as just recently, and reflect on the various things that it has been and the various things that it is now (particularly now) it should become evident, *pace* Isaiah Berlin, that philosophy has no task, to say nothing of a central or crucial task or vocation; something distinctive that only philosophers can do or others can do only by doing philosophy. It is sometimes said that anyone who does carefully reflective things about life automatically becomes, by implicit and persuasive definition, a philosopher. This is not true. Not all people who are deeply reflective are philosophers or are doing philosophy, though thankfully some philosophers distinctively have made the above mentioned humanistic activities central to their intellectual lives and activities. But to engage, and indeed to engage well, in such activity need not be to philosophize.

However, I have come to see—or think I see—how little philosophy can contribute to the common good and how often philosophy actually gets in the way of contributing. Sartre

and Russell were up to their necks in the political fray but what did their philosophy, different as it was between them, help them in their emancipatory political endeavors? I think little, if anything, should be the answer here. Russell was particularly clear about that. That this is so with and for philosophers, including philosophers who are political activists, is becoming increasingly evident. Their political activity, even their theoretical political activity, need not be philosophical. Even when they use philosophical terms such as entailments, speech acts or language games, though they *may* be useful conceptual notions but not necessarily indicative of a philosophical orientation. They may be only for them what they take to be a conceptual shorthand and not intended to be a part of a philosophical problem or solution.

Some will think there are the problems of nihilism and skepticism that remain distinctive philosophical problems that are politically and more broadly also socially importantly relevant. But they are also plainly up for political clarification and perhaps up for analytical philosophical cure. Well perhaps? When push comes to shove we may not be able to prove logically or otherwise purely rationally establish or otherwise philosophically establish any moral or otherwise normative judgment to be so. But in that way we cannot prove any empirical judgment or perhaps not anything substantive.

However, we should not forget Wittgenstein's claim that justification must have an end or otherwise it would not be justification. Still, a kind of minimal commonsense intervenes as it often did for Moore and Wittgenstein and, earlier, for Reid, though with Wittgenstein in a different way. We need not and should not get nihilistic or actually skeptical about whether there is grass on our front yards or whether it snowed last night when we see snow on the ground the next morning. We have no room for doubt here unless

perhaps we are new and rather uninformed arrivals from a very temperate climate. We certainly normally know when this obtains all without the help of philosophy. And it would be pointless, indeed silly, to ask us for proof of these things. Indeed, it is not only pointless and silly but downright stupid. (Or is being stupid culturally relative?) The same thing goes concerning asking for proofs of the evilness of cutting off someone's tongue just for the fun of it or burning someone alive on the stake as was a medieval practice or treating someone as if they were worthless just in order to destroy them for the fun of it. Sometimes people do such things and sometimes even just for the fun of it. But we know that such acts are evil without having a philosophical argument for it or its requiring rational examination. Any philosopher that argued or said it is not wrong would be plainly, indeed grossly, mistaken as they also would be if they said it needed to be proved. *Sometimes* asking for proof is just silliness. There are many things we know and sometimes with certainty that neither we nor anyone else can prove. They cannot be logically proved, have *a priori* demonstration. They sometimes cannot be proved at all. But this does not show that the genuinely *a priori* ones are more solidly justified than some empirical generalizations, e.g. that there are no strawberries on the sun. Moreover, it cannot be established that the *a priori* ones are more solidly established than any other ones. This is even true sometimes for normative judgments. We can be as sure that what goes on in torture centers where unrestrained torture is practiced is evil as we can be sure that there are dandelions on our front yard or that ice cream melts if exposed to the hot summer sun. It is without meaning to ask which certainties are the most certain certainties, though they are differently known to be certain. Certainties here are established in different ways but there is no way of establishing that one way of establishment is better, sounder, than another or that it establishes a more 'certain

certainty' than the other or others. That very idea is absurd. All certainties are certainties but some certainties are more certain than other certainties is plain nonsense. Many philosophers are hooked on the *a priori* ones. That, they think, is where the real certainty is. But that some think in this way is a matter of arbitrary philosophical enculturation. There is no way of establishing or perhaps even giving sense to a claim that one certainty is more certain than the others. If any sense can be given to it, it depends on the context and what we are wanting certainty for. And it is absurd to say there are no certainties at all. But there is a longstanding prejudice among many philosophers for the *a priori* or in effect what is taken to be *a priori*. We should take note that there are different kinds of certainty but we should not go gung-ho for the priority of one over the other. We should put such pseudo-questions aside. But it is not such considerations that triggers thoughts of nihilism, to say nothing of nihilistic sympathies, but it has instead often triggered off by a kind of unreasonable philosophical skepticism.

What then does trigger some philosophical talk of nihilism? Among some philosophers and some legal theorists principally in Scandinavia they once articulated and defended in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century a mixture of what later came to be called by others non-cognitivism or error theory concerning value judgments. This was labelled 'value-nihilism' by some Scandinavian theorists. This labelling was unintentionally misleading for it in effect claimed that fundamental value judgments unlike fundamental empirical judgments or logical propositions could not be true or false for they, or so it was often thought, were in reality just expressions of emotion without cognitive content that were mistakenly often thought to have some mysterious cognitive content. Here it bears some family resemblance to how some philosophers have considered what they have called

God-talk. But there was nothing nihilistic about that, any more than there is about a sigh, a groan, a belch or a hiccup. This non-cognitivist account was argued for by these philosophers and for a time was influential, but it did not generate nihilistic activity or practices. It was done for a purpose but because of a way of viewing things that it was it did flare up live nihilism. Those Scandinavian ‘*value nihilists*’ usually remained good leftish social democrats. They were no more nihilists than were Ayer, Hägerström, Russell, Mackie or Stevenson.

What, then, is nihilism and what motivates it? It is where people deliberately reject any and all societies’ ways of life and all societies’ values and indeed any values. It is also a very fundamental and uncompromising attack on them. It is both an attack on any society’s values and those of any individual. It is an attempt at absolute value nihilism. Values, these theorists had it, are utter illusions arbitrarily enculturated into almost all of us. Moreover, they are illusions to be just outright rejected for what they are. But this does not deny there is factual truth or analytic *a priori* truths. But it is to deny their value.

But then how can, if it can, nihilism not be irrational? Isn’t a nihilist in actuality a person who is thoroughly and indeed utterly without values? But isn’t that irrationality incoherent? Or is so reasoning in effect just evasively trying to comfort ourselves? (Some would say that ‘irrationality’ is utterly unacceptable.)

I thought, and still think, that I understand what nihilism is, though no doubt without the finesse of a linguistic analyst on that subject. But I have never tried in a firm way to probe ‘nihilism’s’ meaning. But just to make sure I had the ordinary understanding of nihilism I looked it up in a dictionary, to wit *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Indeed, in fact a very big dictionary. It tells us that nihilism is “1. negative doctrines in religion or morality, a total rejection of current religious beliefs or moral principles; 2. *Philos*, a form of skepticism,

a denial of all existence 1836; 3. the doctrines or principles of the Russian Nihilists 1868” (1328). This dictionary goes on to speak in defining ‘nihilism’ of nihilists being (though of course not exclusively) members “of a Russian party professing extreme anti-social principles 1871” (1328). That all squares with my own prior non-dictionary understanding of nihilism, though I do not *understand* what it is to deny all existence. Wouldn’t there have to be a denier to do that? So how could there not be a denier to do that? So how could there be a coherent denying of *all* existence? Here some bad philosophy has snuck into a dictionary definition. But isn’t it intelligible, however dumb, to deny the *value* of all existence? Well, at least it is mind numbing. Perhaps a dumbing down of ourselves?

I asked myself what nihilism would come to in practice. A major character in Turgenev’s masterpiece *Fathers and Sons* takes himself to be a nihilist but he is innocuous enough in practice. The famous Russian party of self-described nihilists and anarchists indeed carried out assassinations of some political figures they opposed. But when one such candidate for obliteration—a tzar, if memory serves me rightly—was passing a bridge in his horse-driven carriage with his children, the anarchists posted there to carry out the assassination postponed their pre-figured assassination attempt for another time so as not to kill the children. They showed they were not without some human kindness or human caring. They did not have the supreme indifference that nihilists are supposed to have. They were not without some ordinary values, including virtues. They were not through and through nihilists in spite of what they said they were. What is it then to be a complete and consistent nihilist?

The Marquis de Sade is sometimes brought into the limelight as the supreme paradigm of a nihilist. I have never read a word of de Sade and do not wish to from what I



have heard of it. He seems to me to have been a sick and demented person, however sophisticated he may have been, whose writings are of no interest to me. Yet he has had the attention of Beauvoir, Bataille, Barthes, Blanchat, Lacan, Cocteau, Philippe Sollers and Foucault. Except as a study abnormal psychology, why should anyone have interest in him? That baffles me. The *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* has just been published (2014) in what has been called “a lavish 1150-page edition of the great erotic writings” of de Sade under the title *Justine et Autres Romans*. I am not going to read it, but I am not at all suggesting that it should not have been published or should not be read. I believe, however, there are other better and more interesting ways I can spend my time. Why should I study it unless I am someone studying abnormal psychology and hear that de Sade was someone who, no matter how subtly, crafted a philosophical treatise in which he writes condoning rape and torture with detailed translations into the concrete? I remain baffled by the fact, if it indeed is a fact, as Hannah Arendt claims in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, that *avant garde* French intellectuals were intrigued by Marquis de Sade. I will not read any of de Sade’s voluminous writings to find out what intrigued them or what can be made of de Sade’s claim that *virtue only brings misfortune*, though indeed it not infrequently does. There should be a hard-nosed realization of that, though that is not to be against virtue but for a good reason to be astute about how and why virtue or so-called virtue is practiced and taken to heart. It should be practiced, though not sanctimoniously. Indeed, it sometimes does bring misfortune. But while we should not seek misfortune out, we sometimes should risk it even though we can be quite confident that it will bring misfortune to you even though of considerable value to others. Think sometimes of whistle blowers. Chelsea Manning, for example, and our blithering on about virtue concerning the injustice of his treatment. That can be tiresome. Making

yourself unnecessarily a sacrificial lamb is stupidly irrational and not to be praised. But again, that is a different matter. I would only study de Sade if I thought it would aide me in some useful way such as to understand all those murders of school children and the like going around now in the United States. But even that is far from de Sade's nihilism.

However, I did read Professor Leland de la Durantaye's informed and sophisticated account of de Sade's *Justine et autres romans*. (See her article in the *London Review of Books* Vol. 27, particularly pages 35-47 for the most relevant material to my discussion.) I found her writing to be an acute and astute account off what an intelligent nihilist was up to. I will give an account of it and articulate my reaction to it in what follows.

Nihilists, she tells us, believing in the message of enlightenment rationality or so-called rationality, came to believe that *life is something to be organized, indeed cannot in reality but be organized, without any inherent goal*. For a nihilist, on de Sade's understanding, violence, an exercise of power and cruelty, are the supreme capacities of human beings who have lost their place in the universe. That becomes their goal. They become supremely ruthless people—men and women—who come to feel nothing at all precisely when they perform the most criminal acts imaginable. In accordance with this goal they strive as nihilists, as Leland de la Durantaye puts it, “to reason away any kind of caring impulse that might come to mind” (Durantaye 2015, 37). They are not sadists, though they do things that sadists do. But they do not have the same motivation as sadists. The sadist is cruel to gain pleasure and the nihilist practices cruelty to exhibit his capacity to reason away any kind of caring impulse. The Nazis or other fascists, by contrast, had an irrational and cruel value system.

She characterizes Sade's philosophy as describing a circle of fire in which libertines are trapped.

The first stage of their dialectic of Enlightenment involves doing away with God in favour of Nature. Nature burns away religious belief through the heat of its passions – or so it seems to the apprentice libertine. But things can't end so harmoniously. For what is Nature, when capitalized in that way? 'Whore!' says Juliette, as it dawns on her that Nature is just one more imposition of order on chaos – less obviously erroneous than a Christian God, but of the same immaterial substance. If you are a libertine in Sade's world you are seeking to break something you fear is unbreakable: belief in order and care for others. This is where real libertine rage sets in. In the speech that gave the Musée d'Orsay their exhibition title, a libertine cries out that he wants 'to attack the sun so as to deprive the universe of it, or use it to set the world aflame'. The same rage makes a libertine elsewhere in Sade cry out: 'Oh, if I could set the universe on fire, I should still curse Nature for offering only one world to my fiery desires!' With the loss of a coherent idea of Nature the libertine loses, as Juliette loses, a coherent idea of crime: Juliette is forced to conclude that 'crime has no reality: that is, the possibility of crime does not exist because there is no way to outrage nature.' Sade's libertines dream of apathy, but for them apathy is like the grail – they can never quite reach it (Durantaye 2015, 37).

For the nihilist there are no values; not even illusions of values. Not even negative values against having other values. Anything goes or does not go. Fellow feeling is nothing to be desired; human beings do not count. A nihilist is numb to the very idea of kindness or to any order of morality. Even an anti-morality morality or a moralism. What people regard as monstrosities such as rape, mass killings, deliberate starvation have no reality for nihilists as things to be avoided. Nothing has. There is no moral or even aesthetic order to be ordained or realized or to be striven for. Defense of a moral point of view, any moral point of view, is an illusion. Kant's or anyone else's idea of pure practical reason is in reality the

natural habitat of unreason. Life has no inherent good or goal or desirable structure or indeed any structure.

Yet if Durantaye, as I guess she does, has a correct or nearly correct understanding of de Sade, then de Sade is an inconsistent nihilist. (Though why should a nihilist care about consistency?) If anarchistically freedom is supreme message as Durantaye takes the nihilist to believe, where “every ounce of fellow feeling has to be stamped out” to ascend ever higher into the empyrean of one’s own autonomy, de Sade is implicitly assuming a normativity, indeed a gross and illusory normativity, that is incompatible with nihilism. By contrast, a consistent nihilism departs with *any normativity at all*. Nihilism and anarchism, revolutionary or not, do not consistently go together. And, with abandoning anarchism and believing that anything goes, then every form of rationality also goes. Are we not splashing around in a tainted sea of unreason? What force, if any, would the nihilist’s response ‘So what?’ have?

Do we who, as Brecht did, want, deeply want, at least to achieve and sustain something approaching an order of kindness, have to bother or even should bother with refuting nihilism or establishing that it is indeed irrational and that irrationality is something to be avoided? I think not. Except to help make it go away we should not bother with it. That is like asking the nonsense question ‘Why be reasonable at all?’ Such expressions of absurdity should simply be ignored except for the fact that they need to be eradicated. The problems of we who would change the world have among them the problems of what Dewey called the problems of men. The problems, that is, not just of men but of all human beings—men, women and children—everywhere. Is the problem of nihilism among these problems? No, it is not either for Brecht or for Dewey or for any reflective human being *who cares about*

*life*. And it is absurd to ask, 'Why care about life?' The problem of nihilism for them is not on their agenda. Though it is not just something to ignore where there is a move toward nihilism. That does not mean that nihilists should be killed or tortured. But they must surely and securely be kept out of their causing harm.

Why be reflective? Why care about life? That we should be reflective or should care about life are self-answering matters. Their very asking is as absurd as is asking 'Is time real?', 'Is there an external world?', 'Are there strawberries on the sun?' or 'Are there human beings who will never die?' All these questions are at best idle. Well, why not be idle? Why not ask idle questions? Why worry your head about not being absurd? Why not ask idle questions, particularly if it amuses you? Again, we have matters that are self-answering. Do we have to ask why not go on being silly or absurd? Philosophy ties itself up if it has to answer such questions. It is like asking if there is an external world. That once was a big philosophical exercise. But it was and is absurd. It like asking whether sense-data have another side or whether solipsism is true or even meaningful. These questions should go on permanent holiday.

Jacques Lacan was right about rejecting philosophy even if in part or perhaps even in whole. But he did largely for the wrong reasons. If some of philosophy should remain, it should be that which John Locke called that of being an under-laborer. But perhaps modernization with its enhanced technology and scientific understanding will provide more efficient ways of Augean stable cleaning. Should there not be, *pace* Alasdair MacIntyre, three cheers for the mechanization of many things in our lives and modernity? This is not to treat people as zombies or robots. Of course not everything should be mechanized or even can be. But our technologizing age has its advantages. It would be a good thing if there were no

longer garbage collectors because there were robots instead to do it. But this does mean that ex-garbage collectors should become couch potatoes. How is a strong, forceful resistance to such a mechanized life not a fine last hurrah?

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