

On What, if any, Philosophical Perplexities Are Genuine

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I

What would a decent world order look like and how can we, if we can, achieve and sustain those things that make for decency or at least something of it? That is a difficult matter. It is not unreasonable to be skeptical here. Some people, indeed many people, say (and I am inclined to say as well) that a better world is possible. Indeed, not a few people chant that. Still, what ideas do we have for achieving any of those things that make frequently for decency? I do not say of any of them that they are impossible to achieve. But I do say the prospects are generally bleak. (In the face of that, what should we struggle to do and how?) But surely whatever we do we should not quiet down and resignedly accept the status quo. Our world is too much of a horror for us to do that. Perhaps, very perhaps, we will fail and the horror will continue to flourish and even increase. But we must (morally must) not become couch potatoes. We must struggle to eradicate this horror. We must fight, and fight intelligently, against it. We must not resignedly just accept this horror. Our world is too much of a horror for us to do that. We must not avoid seeing evil, we must not avoid hearing of evil and, of course, we must not do evil. Plainly there is evil galore. We must not kid ourselves about that. To do so is a gross failure in non-evasive living and seeing.

But we must not, if at all, just chant morally or moralize. We must gain an understanding and the ability to apply some of the mechanisms or techniques that make changes in an emancipatory direction feasible and indeed actual. Here we should take some lessons here from Thorsten Veblen.

And with that, or even without it, we must still struggle for a better world. But even against the odds we must never just chant ethically or moan or cry out in despair. But we must keep actively struggling to gain such a world or at least something of its approximation. But to do so we must—morally must—come to have *some* understanding of what our world is, could be like and what is wrong, sometimes horribly wrong, with many of the places and situations we are in now where we have little, if anything, in the way of knowing *how* to make such a transformation, though we are not without some sense of what that transformation should be. We have a *knowledge that* but little in the way of a *knowledge how*. But we are, or should be, very aware that we must come to have that *knowledge how*. But all of this is not at all like doubting—trying to doubt—typical philosophical things, like that there is an external world or whether solipsism is true or even possible or whether time is unreal. We have no understanding of what these philosophically *alleged* matters would be like as we have no understanding of what a ‘spiritual body’ or what ‘to live spiritually’ would be like or whether we could have ‘spiritual bodies’. But we have other better things to bother ourselves in coming to grips with our moral lives than with these philosophical matters. We should not bother our heads over such metaphysical pseudo-matters. We must realize that we need to come to grasp and apply causal mechanisms that can bring about emancipatory change. It is not enough to chant, no matter how sincerely, what kind of change we want and further to just chant that it is possible. We must come to have as clear a conception of how this can, if it can, be actually so or can actually be made to be so. We must make concrete investigations into how a better world is possible if at all. We must not lose ourselves in counter-factuality.

Here we have causal matters that require a clear grasp of how this can be made to be so. We have causal matters that have an empirical grasp and application. Here philosophy will be of little help beyond perhaps showing some of us something of how these empirical scientific matters must be at work if we are ever to have that kind of world. It is here where Thorsten Veblen, but, of course, not only him, is instructive.

We desire with head and with heart to know how that will answer to reason, to be in accordance with reason. We have some understanding here but no extensive or robust consensus. Moreover, what 'answers to reason' or is 'in accordance with reason' are not very clear ideas. A lot of work must be done here. And it is urgent that we be part of the doing of it. To do whatever we can do, though it may unfortunately be little. We must not quiet down into quietism. Is this moralizing? Yes, of course. What else is there to do *here*? Building on that aspiration a lot of careful causal work about what needs to be done and reasonably, with urgent intent, can be done.

II

For starters in such a quest of a world of kindness and mutual respect, both prerequisites for a decent world, we must as clearly as we can come to understand and to articulate what such a world would be like and how it is to be achieved or at least approximated. We need to have knowledge of how our world can be transformed in that way from the hell or near hell we have now. More of a hell in some parts of the world than others. More in Cairo or Damascus than in Stockholm or Amsterdam with New York City and Naples meshed in between. But hellishness is widespread and eliminating it is no small task.

It is not enough to merely have an idea of what a decent world would be. There must be at least for some key causal agents who have an operational knowledge rooted in empirical investigation and a knowledge of what to do and how to do it.

Metaphysical matters may be blocking such an understanding. The logical positivists and Wittgenstein and his disciples (though often in different ways) have shown such metaphysical matters to be absurd. It is not unreasonable to say that with critical commonsensism (à la Peirce) and pragmatism by Peirce again and by John Dewey and otherwise without philosophy by Thorsten Veblen, we have shown at least that traditional metaphysics is absurd or at least useless. But whether

absurd or not, at least it is something that we could well do without. (Remember that sociologist though he was, Veblen's MA and PhD were in philosophy.)

To change the world intelligently and humanistically we need concerning such matters a good empirical knowledge of things, a knowledge, that is, of the way the world is. Philosophical speculation usually gets in the way here. We need, rather, empirical evidence including knowledge of the causal mechanisms which, when they become operational, will be able to transform matters in societies and eventually in the whole world into places of decency and perhaps even human flourishing. Not for just in a few but across the board. We even need to know how to make Kinshasa a decent place for humans to live in. Surely something of a job. One can very well be pessimistic about matters here and fear that we are deluding ourselves in hoping and struggling for it. Things indeed are extensively very bad, and not only in Kinshasa but particularly when we look at the world globally. Even Romans have come to think differently about Rome. But that this will remain so is not written in stone. We can and must struggle for change and not just go with the flow as Thomas Nagel thought Richard Rorty did.

The issues here are moral but also moral issues that are deeply rooted empirically. Not the ones that most philosophers like to wrestle with. They are real issues, not philosophically loaded, pseudo-issues. They are matters that require empirical evidence. They are norms none of which are fact-insensitive. Perhaps, *pace* G. A. Cohen, there are no normative judgments that are fact-insensitive (Nielsen 2015, "Rescuing Political Theory from Fact-Insensitivity", online). The *philosophical* questions, if any, that need answering here need answering by reference to empirical facts concerning how our language works, how our language-games are played, and about what are moral practices are. Perhaps language-games that morally speaking must be played. That is perhaps the only place where *philosophy* can be useful concerning morality. That is how what we say achieves warrant. They involve reference to our different ways of life. We have good reasons to believe that there is no *the way* of life that binds all people and peoples together. What we find instead is extensive differences along with some commonalities presently, and even more so historically. Anthropology

and history are useful here rather than philosophy. From them we get an understanding of crucially different ways of life on our planet.

Even though we may find some common kernels, perhaps even some kernels that we humans will acknowledge to be rational kernels, it may still very well be the case that they do not instantiate a rational consensus among us. We may not gain anything that will yield for we humans—with all our tribes, clans, nations and histories—a common way of life. A single rational or reasonable moral point of view.

We should recognize that pluralism may very well go all the way down and not just stop where it is comfortable. When we reflect on the varieties of ways of life in the world, we realize, or should realize if we can be thoroughly rational, that we do not have a sufficient cross-culturally common way of life that can be sustained by cross-cultural examination. When we compare the Aztecs and Incas, on the one hand, with present Nordic people and Anglo Saxons or indeed Europeans generally we get wide and clashing differences. The same thing is true when we claim what once were North American Indian tribes such as the Comanche with Europeans and European settlers. It is not an exaggeration to take it that we often have very different moral universes. What is morally expected and acceptable and even tolerable in various places is sometimes widely different and sometimes comes to sharply conflicting between peoples. Why should it be that ours are the right ones? There are indeed clashing differences between Incas and Quakers. Similarly, and in roughly the same time period there were and are stark differences between Nazis, Golden Dawners or Trumpeters on the one hand, and social liberals and communists on the other. What is morally expected and acceptable is starkly in conflict between these people. It is important to see that liberals in a Millian tradition and communists in Marx's tradition are in the same moral universe. But not fascists and liberals or fascists and communists. But I am with both Bernie Sanders and Justin Trudeau, though I am closer to Sanders than to Trudeau. I find both the Clintons and Trump deplorable but not equally so.

Even at a particular time and with different peoples not vastly different placed there are often considerable differences along with some common kernels concerning how to live. I cannot find my feet with a Henry Kissinger or a Donald Trump but I can with a Bernie Sanders and to a lesser extent a Justin Trudeau. Compare, to go contemporary, Saudi Arabians and Icelanders concerning how to live. Compare, instead, to get even more extreme differences, the differences between Incans at the time of their empire and the people of the United States at the present time, even the Trumpeters and the Golden Dawners. All along the line, including these examples, the differences are considerable as are the differences between a typical contemporary Dane and a typical contemporary citizen of Mississippi. But as deep as their differences are as well as the differences between a contemporary Saudi Arabian and an Icelander, they are mild when compared to the differences between a typical Incan at the height of their empire and that of the typical contemporary American. The differences are not like that of philosophers who wonder whether the external world can be known to be real and physicalists who think that is a pseudo problem. These latter 'problems' are artificial puzzles that interest a few people but are clearly not urgent matters.

By contrast, between a fascist and a liberal, a Catholic and a Quaker, a neoliberal and a socialist we have deep differences about what a good life or a decent life would be. These are very different matters than philosophical matters whether we call the former philosophical matters or not. Whether we can put into question whether the external world exists or not or whether solipsism is true or whether we can know or not that time is real is a quite different matter than these former existential matters. Where these last 'questions' are even meaningful is a genuine issue. We may get into conceptual trouble here but we do not get humanly distressed as we do about how to live and what a good society would look like. Philosophical perplexity is one thing; existential anguish is another.

We may always be rather complacently at odds over whether we can have knowledge that the external world exists, but never, if we are sane, do we have existential anguish over such

metaphysical matters. They do not humanly matter. Life issues are not at issue with them. They do not humanly matter. They may provide mere debating points for philosophical seminars as I sometimes experienced when I was a student, but that is about all. Whether we are a de Sadeist on the one hand or a John Stuart Millist or a Deweyist on the other hand matters and not just, or perhaps even at all, as a source of intellectual puzzlement. But whether or not one is a McTaggartist worried about whether or not time is real is only a stale puzzle with no existential thump or tug. It is not like worrying that a huge meteor is imminently very like to hit us and blot us out or whether global warming is dooming us.