The Ethics of Tragedy and the Origin of Virtue

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A parable from history: When God died no one realized it at first, for truly no one had ever known anything of God. Once we learned of it, we made Truth into his burial shroud and began to hammer in his coffin nails by the millions – a hundred thousand apiece at Tokyo and Dresden, two million at Auschwitz, more at Sobibór, Belzec, and Treblinka. A Little Boy rang his death knell loudly on August 6, 1945, and a Fat Man rang it once more on the 9th. Even if it is possible after the great catastrophes of the last century to live a good life, we are without any objective source for morality. Still, we see the same tendencies in humans as we always have: some toward care and benevolence, others toward violence and depravity. These have resulted in a propensity for tribalism, which has translated itself into fascism and nationalism, rather than agape – with our powerful capacity for reason we are able to rationalize nearly anything, so long as it is on behalf of the tribe. Some have attacked humanism, decrying it as debasing the best among us or denouncing it as naïve, but the only good life for us is found as a human among humans. There is a hope, the smallest hope, for an ethic of respect for human dignity that extends a semblance of our love for those closest to us outward to broader humanity.

“God,” writes Nietzsche, “is a conjecture” (TSZ 197). We now live in an age when the mere postulation of a transcendent source for the good is simply not enough. Still, life must triumph over despair, and indeed it can. We may ask ourselves, “Is there a pessimism of strength? An intellectual predilection for the hard, gruesome, evil, problematic aspect of existence, prompted by well-being, by overflowing health, by the fullness of existence?” and we may answer affirmatively that “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified” (Birth 1, 52). Even without a ‘reason’ to live, emotion alone is enough to pull us toward life. We are without a source for metaphysical meaning and without any hope for finding one, but the potential richness in human experience in this world and in this life is enough to make the effort of living worth our while. Indeed, the loss of any hope for life after death makes this life that much more valuable.
Against nihilism – Zarathustra’s soothsayer describes our condition thus: “All is the same, nothing is worthwhile, the world is without meaning, knowledge strangles” (TSZ 353). Despair is the birth of nihilism from tragedy, it is the most pessimistic possible view of life and is all too easy to fall prey to in these post-objective times. It arises too when we ask ourselves, ‘What is the meaning of our meaning? What is the point beyond the point?’ These questions are only a negation of the possibility of our flourishing in this world and in this life, they can never be answered with certainty and asking questions that defy answers is only another path to despair. Zarathustra responds to the soothsayer, “There is something in me that I call courage; that has so far slain my every discouragement… Courage also slays dizziness at the edge of abysses: and where does man not stand at the edge of abysses?” (TSZ 269). Theodor Adorno writes, “If a life fulfilled its vocation directly, it would miss it” (MM 81). A good life in the face of despair will not be easy, could never be easy, but it is certainly still possible.

Life can no longer be judged against any conceptual moral framework: without God and after witnessing the failures of our reason, the question of ‘am I living well?’ is one that can only be answered subjectively. We know that objectivity in moral judgment is not an option for us; to state objective moral claims is to do nothing more meaningful than recite mathematical fact: both ultimately reduce to tautologies and have no actual connection to life as it is lived. The honest believer and the atheist are in the same place regarding morality: rules and commandment are both gone, neither God’s will nor pure reason can serve as moral sources for us. Our problem is that we have thus far felt that morality must operate on universals and that any ethic of subjectivity is bankrupt and empty, not a morality at all. This reason-centered conception of morality ignores our origins in animal nature – our roots are as cooperative animals, moral action is far more instinctual than convention would suggest and one does not think about one’s instinctive drives. 

It has long been thought that ‘rational self-interest’ would be enough to keep us moral, but how could this ever have served as a guide to ethics? It is a fine method for self-preservation, for running a business, but how could selfishness ever provide a healthy model for all human interaction? Of course, psychological egoism will always hold in a certain sense – that all of the things I do take place in relation to ‘I’ – but ethical egoism, or a system of debt, i.e., me, what you owe me, and what I owe you, could never be a basis for morality; at most they can provide structure to human activity. Adorno writes, “The eye for possible advantages is the mortal enemy of all human relationships; from these solidarity and loyalty can ensue, but never from thoughts of practical ends” (MM 35). Rational self-interest cannot be the basis for truly ethical, principled action, for treating another person as another person. For a morality based on anything more than economy, there must be a preparedness to give without expectation that ‘I’ will in turn receive.

We come to possess specific virtues and moral character, but there are basic evolutionary forces at work in us that point us toward cooperation and protection of those closest to us. These are from our prehistoric origins in band and tribal societies; our virtue then was formed from ‘what is good for the band’. Nietzsche’s genealogy of slave and master
moralities may be correct, and contemporary moralities may be ‘slavish herd moralities’, but we were fundamentally cooperative beings long before we divided ourselves into slave and master; we had, in a sense, a ‘pack morality’. *Homo homini lupus* makes a great deal more sense when one considers that wolves are pack animals. The first principle of the human ethical impulse: “Whatever is done from love always occurs beyond good and evil” (BGE 153). The root of our moral actions lie beyond a ‘why?’, beyond any justification other than love and intuitive response. There is no *reason* we can articulate that explains why we love anyone at all; nevertheless, we would do anything on behalf of those closest to us, and certainly not because we are motivated by abstract notions of the morally proper thing to do.

Along with our virtues of cooperation and benevolence come motivations for violence and aggression. For all the good, beneficent things we do for those closest to us, we stand prepared to visit violence upon those who appear as a threat. Again, the notion that such violence is ‘evil’ does not at first enter our minds; if it appears at all it is only in reflection. Charles Taylor writes, “We can imagine that our ancestors had to develop propensities for fighting and if necessary killing outsiders… That our evolutionary history has contributed something to who we are today must in some sense be true” (Taylor 658). This inclination to violence is most present in young men, and most active in those who are also angry, poor, bored, and without a future, like those in Palestinian refugee camps or Brazilian *favelas* (Taylor 659). War, it seems, is a part of life: when threatened, the animal becomes aggressive. Of course such a reduction is overly simplistic, man is the *rational* animal after all and seems greatly removed from nature, but we would do well not to underestimate the power of these destructive impulses.

Nietzsche offers a more egoistic explanation describing the very same impulses, “A well turned-out human being, a ‘happy one,’ *must* perform certain actions and shrinks instinctively from other actions… In a formula: his virtue is the *effect* of his happiness” (TI 493). When placed in certain situations we feel some kind of call to action, a mostly instinctive, emotional motivation – not requiring much thought beyond recognition of the situation at hand – to do something. We need no moral code to tell us, for example: “intercept the small boy before he makes his way into the road.” We call the action brave, altruistic; we give our instincts names and they become our virtues. But we see him chase his ball, see the cars moving – and almost instantaneously spring into action to stop him. This protective impulse has nothing to do with rational concepts of the good and everything to do with gut-level reaction to an immediate situation, they are responses “faithful to the earth” (TSZ 125). There is no “thou shall protect children” or “I should be brave and do a good deed” needed for us to act; these only motivate us much later on in our evolutionary, historical, and moral development and much more abstractly. It is of course *possible* that rational thought takes over and changes one’s course of action, but this is a departure from the typical instinct-driven reaction and is never a primary response.

Our actions on behalf of those closest to us are motivated much more by intuitive feelings – rather than conscious thoughts – that we *must* act than they are by moral imperatives that we *ought* to act. Unfortunately, and
seemingly inevitably, the love of those closest to us can turn ‘another person’ into ‘an other person’. Our natural sympathies today extend first to our families and closest friends, then perhaps to our ‘tribe’ or nation, and then hopefully to all humanity – this last bond is very weak when compared to the others, and depending on circumstances can be easily overridden. When we feel that ‘we and ours’ are threatened by anyone perceived as ‘other’, we are inclined to do violence to them: thus the origin of genocidal destruction from Carthage to Darfur. No matter the rules established and measures taken against it, we will always care more about those closest to us than those to whom we have no strong connection. We have no natural desire to harm people simply because we do not know them, but when given even an inkling of a reason to treat them with hostility, that is what we have tended to do.

How does this happen? “Morality rationalizes. That is, the code is based on some conception of what the good or right is, related to human well-being. This brings with it some notion of responsibility. We punish wrong-doers” (Taylor 688). As soon as we establish a legal-rational code of right and wrong, our behaviors are given rational justification. In this sense, it might well be said that rational morality makes excuses. If something is wrong for a reason and is not wrong in itself, then aberrations from our normal rules can be justified as long as we can provide stronger reasons for these actions. If it is ‘wrong because’, it becomes subject to the power of reductive dialectic, the repeated ‘why?’ that can find no answer. So killing may be against God’s law, but as we are God’s elect, our killings of heretic and heathen are allowed. Put another way, if our revolution aims at an egalitarian utopia and it can only be brought about at the point of a bayonet, so be it.

“We have the moral right, we had the duty to our people to do it, to kill this people who wanted to kill us… We have carried out this most difficult task for the love of our people. And we have taken on no defect within us, in our soul, or in our character.” A common sentiment expressed countless times throughout history and used to justify all kinds of righteous barbarisms, but in this case, the words of Heinrich Himmler. Even in his Posen speech, there is present a tone of guilt at the ‘noble deeds of the bold and pure SS’. The task was “difficult” not just in the sense that it took much effort, but in that it was not easy for his men to accustom themselves to mass murder. Although they could kill for the good of the Reich and the Volk, even these hardest, cruelest of men were still not able to dismiss the raw facticity of their obscene excess. Carrying out a genocide is grim, ugly work: in all healthy members of a society there is something instinctively repulsive about killing children, but we have seen that with ‘justice’ on one’s side, the task can become possible. When the lie is repeated enough, I am no longer the murderer of innocents, I am the poor soul who had to witness the tragic but necessary deaths of so many people in carrying out my duty.

These days we tend to be a little less righteous in our glorification of violent deeds, but the moralizing tone is still there. There is a view commonly espoused today by religious and political ideologues that, “Violence is ugly and savage, but it must nevertheless be used by [our] noble and dedicated warriors” (Taylor 689). We tell ourselves that
violence really is awful, but that we have to use it and that it is therefore a good thing in this case. The end result is, unsurprisingly, the same. We rationalize our violence, making ‘us’ the side of right and good, and ‘them’ a faceless enemy fit only for destruction, then we think there is some mystery as to how a 19-year-old boy, with all the values that an upbringing as an American and a Christian could afford him, could ever become the kind of person who shoots a peasant for looking vaguely like the people he has been fighting. After all, did we not tell him that violence was ugly? Depravity is not always from innate pathology, brutality can become a habit like any other, regardless of the initial justification provided for it.

Taylor asks, “Why can’t out moral/ethical life ever be adequately captured in a code?” (704). The ethical tradition of the West is such that a ‘morality’ means a list of right and wrong, good and bad actions; these lists are typically generated from a single motivating principle, whether utility, categorical imperative, or God’s will, but today we are aware that there can be no more codifying systems or determinate rules. Taylor cites two reasons from Aristotle that an alternative is needed: that no concrete system will be able to capture every possible circumstance and that there is more than one good – i.e., more than one motivating principle; the second factor really just demonstrates the weight of the first. A one-rule system is dangerous, it upholds one good at the expense of all others and “dumbs us down, morally and spiritually” (707). If it is not explicitly ‘against the rules’, then it is permissible. If a situation arises in which the rules are not clear no moral judgment may be made, and when are the rules ever perfectly clear?

Our moral righteousness gives us the thought that there is a “right of the innocent to punish the guilty, of the victim to purge the victimizer” (Taylor 709). This is the second guiding tradition of Western morality: that the foundation for the ethical is a system of debt. Nietzsche describes the common view of justice thus: “What justice means to us is precisely that the world be filled with the storms of our revenge.” He urges us, “Mistrust all those in whom the impulse to punish is powerful. They are people of a low sort and stock; the hangman and the bloodhound look out of their faces” (TSZ 212). The whole language of justice is not so different from that of vendetta: there is little difference between ‘balancing the scales of justice’ and ‘settling scores’ or ‘getting even’. When we speak of justice being served, the offender always ‘gets his due’.

When one judges by such a system, one judges in terms of absolute right and wrong. This makes mass condemnation inevitable. If ‘they’ are totally in the wrong and ‘we’ are absolutely in the right, how could justice be anything less than their destruction and our triumph? It is unrealistic to hope we will ever eradicate the ‘tribal instinct’ altogether, there will be a need for defensive wars and philia will always trump agape, but as far as is possible we can keep these sentiments in check. What must be done is to strip the nobility from the necessity. Violent action will at times be necessary, but the notion that we are purely and absolutely in the right is never appropriate; the justifiable is not ‘the
just’. Our action in times of war – and after wars – must never be guided by the belief that we have a debt to collect, but that all parties involved have problems in need of resolution.

Charles Taylor draws from Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, where two modes of thinking are presented: one is that “no one is to blame”; in counterpoint to this it is offered that “we are all to blame” (709). The former mode of thought is seen commonly in our liberal, therapeutic society. As a product of my times, I ‘know’ that there are no gods, that there is no good, evil, or sin, that there is no free will and that all actions are mechanistically predetermined. In spite of all of that, I cannot avoid the feeling that I am responsible for my actions and that there are somehow good and bad attached to them. From Montaigne’s *Essais*: “Not being able to govern events, I govern myself.” No matter our knowledge of the minute details of the mechanics at work in the world, we still have a sense of personal responsibility and ethical principle. Nietzsche repeatedly says ‘we are not responsible, there is no free will’. He calls our beliefs about freedom, cause and effect “errors,” but the very fact that he bothered to write at all tells us something: inescapably, regardless of our ‘destiny’, we still feel free and responsible – as a result of instinct?

On a very basic level, there is something in us that allows us to recognize the humanity possessed by others. We know that we do not want to die, so we know intuitively that to end a human life is a matter of supreme gravity never to be taken lightly. I can see in another that he is not so terribly different from anyone in my life who I am close to, who I would never want to harm, who I regard as almost an extension of myself. Killing becomes a trivial matter only when ‘he’ comes to be regarded as no more than an instantiation of ‘they’, when a subject becomes an object in a class of objects that is threatening and dangerous. Mass-scale butchery of entire peoples is only possible when the particularity of each person is ignored – when names and faces and backgrounds are replaced by classifying labels and tattooed numbers.

We will never erase depravity, nor will we rid ourselves of our potential for violence; but it is wrong of us to forget that the depraved are humans too, that humanity at its worst is still humanity; the cruelest killers among us are as essentially human as any other. The ‘problem of evil’ is a human problem, those who suffer from it are not inhuman, even if their actions are unconscionable. We can accept that we are all responsible: not guilty as a condition of our existence, but that we are all fallible and have all failed, but how are we to deal with this secularized problem of evil? The potential for violence is one thing, but the worst of the worst seem to defy explanation. Adorno writes that it is tempting for some to say, “For me, Adolf Hitler is a pathological case.” While they would be correct in terms of describing the man, leaving it at that is absurdly clinical and ignores the magnitude of his deeds. “People thinking in the forms of free, detached, disinterested appraisal were unable to accommodate within those forms the experience of violence which in reality annuls such thinking” (MM 56-7). We lack the terms to adequately explain and account for real monstrosity, but we cannot write it off.
Schopenhauer has an explanation for all of the horror and brutality we see: that we inhabit the worst of all possible worlds; if things got any worse, the world would cease to exist. There is a misanthropic, egoistic view of our nature at work here, but this supreme negativity is in the end nothing more than a self-fulfilling prophecy. The unflinchingly cold and hard man reflects in his actions a hatred for all things that are not themselves cold and hard: the people who have the most pessimistic possible picture of life do not want the world to be better, more livable; in their resignation to a life with negative value, they want to see nothing positive and ignore most of the sources for value in life. Of course, even the worst of all possible worlds must still be livable; there must be some justification for life, otherwise life could not endure.

I referred above to the cold and hard man deliberately: there is something decidedly misogynistic about the thought of a Schopenhauer or a Nietzsche. Even if it were not as explicitly detailed in their works as it is, the themes that would point one in that direction are still present. For the former, being born is a tragedy but giving birth is a crime; for the latter, all that is good is masculine, raw, the embodiment of strength; for both, women’s only role is to serve. There is no place in their work for the good of the group, only for the will of the strong individual. If people are not worthwhile and it is better to be ruler than ruled, what could be valuable except for the ability to dominate others? And obviously, a man’s larger height and width at the shoulders, his testosterone-charged drive to violence and strength, show that he is more fit than any woman could ever be to live this ‘best kind of life’. The neglect of our social nature is demonstrative of some serious flaws in their writing.

It is clear that one perspective cannot encompass the entirety of the human condition. We are not wholly human by ourselves, but only in relation to others: our parents, siblings, spouses, children; our dearest friends and even our adversaries. Our primary sources of meaning, value, and identity come from human interaction. The totally solitary human, the wholly pessimistic man, is incomplete and, if his pessimistic momentum carries him forward, without hope. There is no place in an anti-humanist philosophy for community. Hobbes’ notion of the Leviathan as a necessary condition of civil society ignores the fact that we never lived alone, in a ‘pure state of nature’; even if we once inhabited a more violent and immediately dangerous world, we never did so by ourselves, but in groups. There is an essential human good to be found in community of which anti-humanists are willfully ignorant. Life presents itself as a problem to the misanthrope, but how could it be otherwise when life is meant to be lived with people?

Without God, without any absolute certainties, nothing can be justified except in terms of aesthetics, in terms of emotional response. We cannot lie to ourselves, we cannot rationalize – so whatever the result of our project, at least it will be honest. Taylor quotes Camus, “honour is the only possible morality for a man without God” (695). All that is left for us from which to forge a virtuous character are honesty about our motivations and respect for the lives of others. Reason and passion can combine in dangerous ways, especially when the former is used to justify the latter. They should
be used to temper each other: aggression checked first by reason, and rationalizing stopped by sympathy. We can also use our reason to extend our natural sympathies: we know that there are some people we would give anything for, that there is no reason for this, and that no two people are fundamentally different in the ‘amount of human dignity’ they possess. This we occasionally and laudably do, but to hope for a change in human nature is dangerous. We cannot afford to make maximal demands of our moralities, we will only fail ourselves. We cannot hope for a return to the past, in Oswald Spengler’s words: “The march of time cannot be halted; there is no question of prudent retreat or clever renunciation. Only dreamers believe there is a way out. Optimism is cowardice.” But we are not completely without hope: our inherent drive toward virtuous deeds on behalf of others will never leave us, these benevolent instincts are, fortunately, hard-wired into us; experience shows that we are at least capable of extending our natural sphere of ethical concern, the tragic reality has been that we rarely do so. We will always act out of love for those closest to us – it is fair to ask of us something as small as the mere acknowledgment of the dignity of those we do not know well enough to love. The smallest respect is now our strongest recourse.
Bibliography


