

Why Bother: Is Life Worth Living?

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WHY BOTHER:
IS LIFE WORTH LIVING?*

We must beware of our penchant to dismiss the cliché phrase, especially posed as a seemingly trite rhetorical question. At first glance, the query as to whether life is worth living strikes us as somewhat routinely jocular, a sort of throw-away question to which one would not expect a reply, let alone an answer. Nonetheless, if we take the question at dead reckoning (pun intended, for the inquiry, after all, is about death, that is, my death) then its seriousness leaps to the fore.

THE QUESTION

So, let us ask ourselves, each in turn, is *my* life worth living? Surely, we must avoid a present-minded response for at some time, the *yin* and *yang* in most of our lives, the only appropriate refrain would have been to wit: I wish I could die.

Yet, even if we extricate ourselves from an immediate personal crisis, an identical plea, justifiably, could be entered. The arrangement of my own death, despite its chilling finality, does bring with it two salient advantages. First, it is a free act and, for that matter, perhaps my only free act, ever. Second, its very finality is also liberating as in the sadly bravado comment, “Well, I shall not have to put up with that (or anything) anymore.”

If the reader-listener finds this too lachrymose or riddled with the allegedly nasty vice of systemic despair, I counter by offering a brief diagnosis of what it is to “do” living.

THE SETTING

The first, foremost, and permanent ontological fact of our human situation is that we were born to live but sure to die. The awareness of this central, irreducible, incontrovertible fact comes to each of us at different times in our lives. For me, being full-blood Irish-American, the awareness came very early, at age four or five. The setting was traditional, no less than participation in that glorious linguistic piece of self-deception, the “wake.” And just why, I would boldly ask, is Aunt Peggy asleep, here in the parlor? I was told that this sleep was necessary if she were to “wake” again, as in the powerful and oft-healing biblical motif, paraphrased as “if the seed does not die, ye shall not have eternal life.”

* To be presented in an APA symposium on What Makes Life Worth Living, December 30. Karsten Harries will be co-symposiast, and Jay Rosenberg will comment. See this JOURNAL, this issue, 684–90, for Harries’s contribution.

I came to accept that explanation, albeit with the canny dubiety often found in the not so virginal mind of a child. And, the click of tall glasses filled with rye and ginger created a domestic celebratory atmosphere that could only bode well for the future of Aunt Peggy. It was much later in my life that I became sadly aware that the alcohol was far less a celebratory liquid amulet than an attempt to deaden intractable pain. The searing truth of this reached a crescendo when I drank my way through my father's wake, a pain still throbbing.

Some among us believe that in time we shall be redeemed. I do not so believe. Some among us believe that death is *au naturel*, or as Marcus Aurelius contends, a sort of spiritual nitrogen cycle, knit by an inexorable and holy bond. I do not so believe. Still others refer to us in our future state of finality as "the grateful dead." I do not so believe.

Neither you nor I were asked if we were willing to start on this journey. Our conception resulted from the acts of others. Is it not plausible, then, that we may come to resent being told that we must finish a journey begun tyhastically by us, willy-nilly as it were. Our opponents charge us with *hubris*, an important Greek word which means pride, nay stubborn, self-destructive pride as testified by Achilles sulking in his tent.

My version of *hubris* is that it means the acting out of a perpetual adolescent protest. Yet, is *hubris* an accurate description of those of us who have serious doubt about whether life is worth living and who refuse to accept a supine gentility as the appropriate response to mortality? I think not. To the contrary, and paradoxically, I offer that only a response of refusal to accept the righteous character of the inevitability of death can make it possible for life to be worth living.

THE PROBLEMATIC

So much for a general philosophical landscaping. Let us now come closer to hand by means of a phenomenological diagnosis of our "text," namely, indeed, is life worth living? The term 'life' can be only used retrospectively as in my life, or, if you knew of my life, or, what a life I have had, or, I have no life, or, plaintively, this is a life? The term 'living', on the other hand, is a process word, a present participle, a happening, and a witness to the "specious present." Following John Dewey, we live only at this time and at no other time and so life is an abstraction, perched above our living as a desperate effort to identify ourselves, to become existentially instantiated. Yet, the only part of our past which exists is the past that is present to us. And the future is but a "gossamer wing," rapid, elusive, and most

always, by far, doomed to be different from the futured intentions of our present.

Our living is not out of something or in something. Nor is it about something, or on behalf of something. Rather, our living is constitutive of our person. Who we are at any moment is precisely our living. Obviously, spatial metaphors fail us here. Analogous to our physiological activity, which goes on always until it stops, forever, so too does our personal living proceed inexorably, without respite, without any extrapolation for purpose of an objective view; for that, too, is our living. Our language, especially in its fidelity to a subtle yet pervasive Aristotelean bequest, leads us to believe that stasis, substance, place, thing are where we are, what we hold as if we moved from box to box, external to the flow that courses through us. My version emulates the female body, that is, I see us as uterine, a permeable membrane, eating, breathing, livering all the while. For me living is a journey, the origin of which is not of our making. The goals are *en passant* and the end is ontologically tragic, although for many of us, alas, it may be salutary, even unfortunately welcome.

THE JOURNEY

If it is so that the meaning of the last, ultimate end is unknowable, then at best our human journey involves risk. More, the ultimate end, should there be such, seemingly has no significance for me, personally, at all. The philosophical question as to the “beginning” and the “end,” if there be either, and the still deeper question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” are precisely that, questions; fascinating, intriguing, nagging, perplexing in the sense of Maimonides, yet irresolute. Their obduracy is not due to our failure, thus far, to unlock the argument, but rather to being cast in such a way that however we turn we face an experiential surd. Whatever else one wishes to say about Parmenides, he is right when he cautions us about the attempt to discuss *nothing*. In roughhouse terms, with regard to the ultimate meaning of existence we do not and can not have a clue. Does it not follow that a homely question emerges, namely, why bother?

Yes, why bother? Why *should* we live it through to our end? This is a revealingly different question than why *do* we live it through. The answers to the latter question are as old as human consciousness. They appear as brilliant constructs, anthropologically, liturgically articulated, and often accompanied by repressive totems, warnings, advice and claims, none of which has any ultimate certitude.

If I do not know the ultimate meaning of when, of how, of why, and I am deeply skeptical of the integrity of those efforts to expli-

cate those questions so that I shall behave as cajoled, demanded or in response to a promise, the most fake of all the attempted resolutions, then again our question comes to the fore, why bother?

It may justly be asked that, if one does not bother, what else does one do? The answer is very singular and clear. One should commit suicide. Granted that this decision has to be a careful one for it is the final insulating cut, the permanent withdrawal from the process, from the fray and the end of hope for a way back in and out. We have no way of knowing whether those among us who have committed suicide have actually made a liberating decision, for the famous and infamous suicide note is always anticipatory. There can be no reportage on the aftermath from the doer of the deed. The assumption here is that the person committing suicide is fully aware of what he is doing. It is not true that suicides are "crazy" people, for the latter rarely kill themselves. It is also not true that suicide is necessarily a selfish act in that it leaves behind gaping wounds in the lives of others. Obviously, that can be and often is the scenario. Just as often, however, suicide is an act of moral courage and altruism, putting an end to the mayhem and hurt caused by the person who no longer believes that life is worth living. *Straight out then, living should be a personal choice made over against the existential, viable, often plausible, and certainly liberating option of suicide.* Certainly, to choose to go on living should be more than a response to those quietest phrases: 'life goes on' and 'so it goes', 'round and round we have it', as 'the world turns'.

As of this moment, I am living. At one point in the recent past, I chose not to go on living. Before my decision was consummated, I was personally seized and forced to reconsider. Alike with Dax Cowart, the Galveston burn victim, I have mixed feelings about that reprieve. Still, having it granted, I now undertake to ground the decision to go on living, hoping to answer the question, "Is life worth living?" affirmatively.

The sentence for which I reach to assist me does not come from the *Bible* or from the *Tao te Ching* or any other spiritual literature. It is from *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus and reads, "I want to know if I can live with what I know and only with that." An understanding of the life and thought of Camus, especially as found in his early North African essays, makes it obvious that, for him, "to know" is not to be construed in a narrow, traditionally epistemological way. Knowing for Camus is ringed with ambience and is inclusive of the tacit, the inchoate. In my version, personal knowing is best found in our affective experiences, which no matter how dangerous, how trivial, never lie. As we feel so do we know. Concepts, set in the

brilliant schemata of the philosophers, trail our percepts, wooing them into coherence, correspondence or with Ockham, *flatus vocis*. As with William James, when faced with the problem of living I lean to “knowledge by acquaintance” rather than “knowledge about,” unless one means to be up and about or hanging about.

THE JOURNEY: SUFFERING AS TEXTURE

Now as I decide to bother, both by acquaintance and by about, I ask myself the question, just what is it that is coming at me as I am living in the world. Is there a message, an *utterance*, a voice from the *logoi* of persons, nature, things, and artifacts? As I listen, I hear, for the most part, the voice of unrequited suffering. If one does not believe, as I do not, that in the long run, *sub specie aeternitatis*, that all will be well, be one, be redeemed, or in the die-cast metaphysics of Las Vegas, even out, then the voice of the unrequited takes on a shrill, chilling, razor-sharp quality. The voice threatens to unseat any and all efforts at equanimity, let alone serenity.

Those among us who are reflectively knowledgeable are all too aware of the grisly fact that, since the beginning of human history, most persons did the living in a grinding, precarious, and repressed setting. In this century alone, yet to close, despite (or because of) its exquisite technical and scientific accomplishments, more than fifty million people have met death prematurely, violently, vulgarly, even obscenely at the hands and minds of other human beings, chasing one absolute or another due to religion, region, ethnicity, language, skin color, or race. Has life been worth living for those who for decades have suffered under periodic eruptions of attempted genocide, local internecine strife, or as featured by the twentieth-century, world-wide narcissistic bathing in rampant destruction?

These disasters have not befallen me, thus far. And so, is this jeremiad on behalf of collective, long-standing, seemingly intractable suffering, any skin off my nose? Question! To what extent should I allow the suffering of others affect my version of life's being worth living? The responses to this question are very revelatory as to how we understand ourselves, have ourselves as it were, as a human living creature, a person. (The ongoing destruction of our ecosystem and our treatment of all living creatures is surely germane to our question but is not of reach in the present context.)

One response, callous, but widespread, is that the suffering of others is neither our problem nor our concern. A second response, delusive, self-deceptive for me, is that there but for the grace of whatever, whomever, go I. This is a sort of talismanic approach in which the Greek notion of *moira* is transformed into the American notion of luck. Of this, I offer that Descartes was closer to the truth

when he flirted with the possible existence of a *mal genie*. The Manicheans were closer still when they posited good and evil in an eternal, irresolute embrace. But did not the Calvinists, terrifying though they be, have it right when they held that some are saved and some are not and the reason is arbitrary?

A more affectionate position, despite its character of self-preservation, holds that we cannot afford (the pun is foreboding) to allow others' suffering to enter into our personal ken because its enormity will paralyze us or render us hopeless. There is again a strand of self-deception here but this version at least acknowledges that not all is well. The upshot, however, of each of these responses is that we should do nothing or we can do nothing to resolve either the existence or the meaning of collective unrequited suffering.

One further and treacherous rationalization abides in the mind of our own self-styled mandarin class, planet-wide. I refer here to a legitimation of human history by virtue of our collective monuments, historical moments of dazzling heroism, reflective accomplishment, and human creations greater than the sun, the moon, and the earth, as John Keats once wrote. Just how does one reconcile the magnificence of the Pyramids, Angkor Wat, and the Great Wall with how they were built, by whom, and at what human price. Can we afford, spiritually, psychologically, to reflect on the plight of our Irish and Chinese forbears as we Amtrak our way from Chicago to Los Angeles? Do we not then invoke the Spartacus syndrome forgetting the history of Thrace while thrilling to the courageous if abortive rage of one who carries for us just a glimmer of liberating possibility? I have no way out of this masking of the terror of our past. It would seem that Hegel was accurate when he described human history as a slaughter bench, riven with victims, rescued only in meaning by those "heroes" who epochally embody the *Phenomenologie des Geistes*. And just what do we think, only recently, of the contrast between our being appalled at the potential destruction of the archaeological treasures of ancient Mesopotamia and the also present destruction of the lives of thousands of children, as innocent in that debacle as they have been in all of the pockmarked millenia preceding? Is it not true that deep within us, the cultural remains take precedence, for, after all, they are immortal, whereas the children, like we, are mortal? And so it goes.

THE JOURNEY: AMELIORATION AS NECTAR

Some decades ago, an unusual refrain was heard over and over as part of a political campaign. After a litany of problems and afflictions, Robert Kennedy would say that "we can do better." This is hardly the stuff of rhetorical flourish, and, yet, the use of the word

'better' is a very important choice, for it replaces all of those halcyon words; cure, resolution, and those metaphors of comfort, as in to straighten out things, make everything whole, all on the way to a great society and a new world order. Unfortunately, these are the seeds of cynicism, for as I look over the wreckage of the human historical past, I see no hope for any resolution of anything humanly important.

This baleful perspective does not, however, obviate other responses such as healing, fixing *en passant*, rescuing, and yes, making, doing, and having things better. These approaches are actions on behalf of metaphysical amelioration, which holds that finite creatures will *always* be up against it and the best that we can do is to do better.

Yes, I acknowledge that the strategy of amelioration is vacant of the ferocious energizing that comes with commitment to an absolute cause, ever justifiable for some, somewhere, in spite of the nefarious results that most often accompany such political, religious, and social self-righteousness. A moral version of the maxim of Camus, cited above, would read, can I believe in helping when, *sub specie aeternitatis*, I hold that there is no ultimate resolution. Put differently, the original meaning of the ancient medical maxim, *primum non nocere*, was to do no harm. How and why did the maxim come to mean, keep the patient alive, at all cost, including the cost of dignity? What is it about us that cannot abide the sacrament of the moment as we reach for a solution, an end game, an explanation, a cure, nay, immortality?

I try as hard as I can to believe that the nectar is in the journey and not in its final destination. I stand with T.S. Eliot, who warns that "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business." Perhaps I can describe my philosophical position as a Stoicism without foundation. Walt Whitman says it for me better than I can say it for myself. "The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections, they scorn the best I do to relate them."

For what it is worth, and that, too, is a perilous question, I now believe, shakily, insecurely and barely, that life is worth living!

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