



# THINKINGS 12

Collected Interventions, Evocations, Readings 2022-23

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Readings: Stormy Lake Erie and Freighter, near Amherstburgh, ON (Jeff Noonan)

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# I: Interventions



## Negotiate, Don't Escalate ...

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... must be the slogan of everyone who is not party to the fighting in Ukraine and not willing to enlist in their foreign legion. I make this claim in response to what I regard as two irresponsible interventions from socialists [Ashley Smith](#) (Democratic Socialists of America) and [Slavoj Zizek](#). Both argue that socialists should not call for peace but for the defeat of Russian forces. The defeat of Russia will be, they claim, a blow against imperialism. I do not disagree that Russia has been and is behaving as a (fading) imperial power, but they ignore the other side of the imperialist equation in play: the interests of NATO and the US. Smith indulges some ridiculous fantasy that the Ukrainian "resistance" can be supported without supporting NATO arms shipments. Zizek is at least more honest in admitting that the support for Ukraine's war efforts means support for NATO arms shipments. Both manage to adopt very unsocialist positions. The only politically responsible position for socialists outside Ukraine to take is to demand negotiations and peace.

Before justifying this position I need to be clear that it in no way denies or attenuates the Ukrainian people's right to resist invasion or the principle of self-determination. No group who has been attacked needs permission from third parties to protect themselves. Russia's invasion, as [I have argued clearly before](#), is unjustified and unjustifiable. Putin and his administration bear ultimate responsibility for the decision to attack and they must be held accountable once the fighting stops (hopefully, by the Russian people themselves). Ukraine has the right to determine how to respond to the assault on its cities and people. If they chose a fight to the death, so be it.

It is one thing to protect your home, it is quite another for others who are not in the line of fire to cheerlead from afar. Here I borrow an argument from Camus' *The Rebel* (in the section called "The Fastidious Assassins," I think): Those who advocate political violence must have the courage of their convictions: if you believe that killing is necessary, you best be ready to kill and be killed yourself. If you are not willing to fight yourself, then you should not encourage others to do so. Ukraine has an open invitation to people who believe in their cause to sign up and fight. If Smith and Zizek are serious about continuing the war (probably for years) until Ukrainian victory, then they should put down their pens and pick up an AK-47 and go to the front lines. There is no glory in having others die for your principles. There is shame in encouraging others to risk more and more death and destruction of their societies for questions of abstract political truth. Smith and Zizek are like little loudmouths in a bar starting a fight but then leaving it to their larger friends to administer or suffer the beating.

Yet, even on the level of abstract political truths Smith and Zizek are wrong. A defeat for Russia will be a defeat for Russian imperialism, but it will be an even more massive victory for US and NATO imperialism. It does not follow that socialists ought to call for a victory for Russia. They ought to call for a negotiated solution on the best terms that Ukraine can get.

I am not a military analyst and have no access to classified information, but all the reports I have read point to a worsening situation on the battlefield and the immanent loss of Donbas and Luhansk to Russian forces. No objective military observer I have read believes that Western arms shipments will do anything to turn the tide but only prolong the agony. Ukraine's bargaining position grows weaker by the moment. Counselling Ukrainians to keep fighting means counselling them to weaken their position when negotiations eventually (as they must) start. It means counselling them to throw more bodies onto the funeral pyre and watch more cities be levelled,

Once again, this argument in no way absolves Russia from ultimate responsibility for that destruction. It simply recognizes, as a historical materialist must, objective reality.

Neither Smith nor Zizek's positions are in touch with objective reality. As I noted, Smith argues for on-going hostilities, but also rejects calls for NATO to arm Ukrainians. As Ukrainians themselves have been loudly arguing, without advanced weapon systems they have no hope. So Smith's position rests on a romantic ideal popular mobilization quite out of tune with the military realities in the ground. Russia is not going to be defeated by a militia of workers and farmers. The only way they will be defeated is through advanced weapons systems that only the US can supply. Smith wants them to continue a fight they cannot win without the arms that Smith would deny them.

Zizek is at least more consistent: he knows that only NATO arms can turn the tide (if anything can) and so openly calls for NATO arms shipments. Think of how astounding that position is for a socialist to take. In the name of supporting Ukrainians, Zizek openly allies himself with the most powerful imperialist alliance on the planet (one which should have been disbanded in 1991 and had it been, there very well might not be a war in Ukraine right now). Zizek objectively allies himself with American arms dealers and the disaster capitalists who will rush in to make money off of Ukrainian reconstruction whenever it begins. Both Smith and Zizek ignore the people from the Global South threatened with food shortages because of the blockade of Ukrainian foodstuffs- a blockade which would end if the war ended. They ignore the shocking backsliding in Europe away from clean energy goals back to burning the worst polluting fossil fuel of them all- coal- and the rapidly gathering economic storm clouds undermining working class living standards everywhere (and especially Ukraine, where war has totalled the economy). They ignore the rampant Russo-phobia in the West, the idiocy of the attacks on Russian culture, and the real problem of far-right nationalism in Ukraine.

Prolonged fighting exacerbates every one of these problems. How can it be the part of socialists, if socialism means societies in which resources are democratically controlled for the sake of all-round development of life-capacities and peaceful relations amongst the world's regions and peoples, (remember the workers of the world have no country?), to support policies that will perpetuate hostilities which ultimately serve the interests of war-mongers and Western imperialists?

Socialists cannot be naive, of course. Russia is a threat to Ukrainian independence. There are deep historical ties between the two countries, but Ukraine has its own history and traditions. Like nationalists everywhere, Ukrainian nationalists exaggerate the purity of their traditions (as

Putin exaggerates the degree of integration between Ukraine and Russia). Socialists should have no truck with *anyone's* nationalist myths. At the same time, in the world as it is presently organized, they have to support demands for independence and national self-determination.

Both of those principles are better served by negotiations and peace than by stoking the hell fires of war. Whether Ukrainians chose on their own to stoke those fires is not my or anyone outside of Ukraine's business- respect for the principle of self-determination means respecting the choices that groups make.

Those of us living in NATO countries nevertheless have a stake in the fight. To speak of my own country, Canada, for a moment, the federal government announced this week that it would be spending about [5 billion](#) dollars to upgrade Cold War era NORAD radars. Trudeau's support for the new crusade against Russia thus costs Canadians 5 billion dollars that could be spent on housing, on health care, on improving infrastructure in First Nation's communities, etc. Across NATO, governments have been tripping over themselves to promise new military spending. Money is being funnelled towards the manufacture of the means of death faster than water is evaporating from Lake Mead. Restarting coal-fired generators will surely expedite that evaporation.

The condensation of the water vapour in the hot air that Smith and Zizek are exhaling will not be sufficient to refill the reservoirs.

Peace out.





## From Perestroika to Putin

Originally posted 1 September, 2022

One of the first times that I recall watching CNN was in 1989: crowds were gathering at a checkpoint on the Eastern side of the Berlin Wall in response to rumours that exit requirements were to be relaxed. The crowds swelled and the guards, pressed by the weight of the throng and in the absence of clear orders, opened the gates. As the day went on more people gathered and began to pound the wall with sledgehammers. Creative destruction indeed.

The analysis of social formations is difficult business. Tracing the complex twists and turns of historical development is an endless scientific task. But one thing is for certain: any society that has to wall its citizens in is no “people’s democracy.” A people in charge of its own collective life will not flee. Where would they go that would be better than the world that they had collectively created for themselves? If you have to imprison people, you have built a prison, not a free society. Whatever the dreams of freedom that motivated the Russian Revolution, whatever its real early achievements, and whatever the real causes of its failure (the destruction wreaked by the Civil War, the failure of the German Revolution, decades long competition with a richer and ultimately more technologically dynamic capitalist world) 1989 left no doubt what the workers of the workers’ states thought: these societies were not the collective expression of their needs and goals but oppressive, externally imposed hells.

The revolutionary activity that spread across the Warsaw Pact countries in 1989 destroyed the fiction of the Stalinist worker’s state but vindicated the deeper Marxist truth that collective working class action is a revolutionary force. That was the central argument of Alex Callinicos’ important historical-theoretical account of the revolutions: *The Revenge of History*. Callinicos gave voice to the widely shared hope on the Western Far Left that the overthrow of the Stalinist regimes would create the conditions for the recovery of the genuinely emancipatory normative core of Marxism and allow it to be channelled by new, genuinely democratic movements and parties.

Revenge these revolutions certainly were, and as vindications of working class power there was no better example in the post-1917 twentieth century. But the connection between socialism and the one-dimensional official culture, suffocating bureaucratic uniformity, police repression, subordination of national wealth to Soviet-Russian imperialism, and violence of the Stalinist regimes in the minds of the Eastern European revolutionaries was—understandably—too powerful. Aside from small grouplets and courageous intellectuals like the independent Russian Marxist [Boris Kagarlitsky](#) (whose book *The Thinking Reed* attained some prominence at this time) there was no recrudescence of a democratic, independent left. The newly independent states of Eastern Europe tacked hard to the nationalist right—where they have by and large remained—while the states of the Soviet Union, and most especially Russia, collapsed into corruption and poverty.

The contradictions of the Soviet Union and popular resistance to its imperialist domination of the Warsaw Pact countries ensured that it was on the road to collapse before Mikhail Gorbachev took power and instituted his policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) in 1985. Workers' resistance had been constant and exploded periodically in moments of open revolt: Berlin in 1953, Hungary in 1956 (an event which split the Western Communist parties), Prague in 1968, Gdansk in 1980. But it took until 1991 for the internal stagnation of the command economy, the anti-Russian imperialist resentments of the Eastern European masses, and the intensifying cold war arms race unleashed by Ronald Reagan for history's revenge to be completed. Gorbachev was soon swept away by events, but he was also more than a pawn in the working out of the iron logic of the Ruse of Reason. He was—like Lenin before him—a world historical individual, a person in whom all the contradictions of his age were concentrated and who had the courage not to deny them. However, since history is more powerful than even the most important individuals, those who have the courage to act as they must—starting a revolution, or allowing its diseased body to die—typically live long enough to see their hopes dashed on the rocks of social and political reality.

Gorbachev lived long after the exhilarating events of 1989-1991. He lived long enough to see the vanity of his hopes for a nuclear free, peaceful world and a prosperous and democratic Russia. When he died on August 30th, his country was at war and led by a President every bit as anti-democratic and anti-worker as the greyest and most dour Stalinist. Yet despite the ideological distance between the eventual social democrat Gorbachev and the nationalist authoritarian Putin, the processes unleashed in 1985 have led directly to the war in Ukraine today.

As Gorbachev took the first steps towards reform, the ideological braying in the West grew louder. Here was proof positive that not only “actually existing socialism” but the underlying communist idea was rubbish. But much more important than triumphalist rhetoric was the stone cold logic of intensified economic war. Reagan seemed to the world like everyone's favourite uncle, but he was a ruthless Cold Warrior. His [Star Wars](#) scheme was not designed to work so much as it was designed to bankrupt the Soviet Union. Reagan's economic and military advisors knew that Gorbachev's mild reforms were objective proof of the fragility of the Soviet system. Gorbachev's arms control initiatives were a desperate attempt to free up much needed resources for the civilian economy. Reagan knew as much and pushed the Soviet Union over the cliff.

What followed was one of the great civilizational collapses of human history. Say what one will about the monstrous crimes committed in the name of communism— and I do not deny them or excuse them— post-Revolutionary Russia also produced some of the greatest scientists, technological achievements, performers, and sports figures of the twentieth century. At terrible cost, a largely peasant society was transformed into an economic, scientific, and military super power. That accumulated wealth, those resources and know-how could have been marshalled by the new democratic movements to actually improve the life and living conditions of Russian workers, but most of it ended up being looted at the behest of Western economic “experts” who preached a doctrine of “shock therapy.” Although he has subsequently got religion and become a champion of egalitarian economic policy and a critic of NATO's role in investigating the war in Ukraine, [Jeffrey Sachs](#) was amongst the leading proponents of rapid onset privatization. The entire civilizational fabric of the state was destroyed. Job disappeared, industries collapsed, and life expectancy fell at an alarming rate.

Profound social instability produces desperation. People realize that their lives depend directly upon functioning social institutions. They will turn to whatever movement credibly promises stability. Where there is no credible Left alternative, forces of the Right can effectively capture the fear and desperation caused by social collapse and use it to win and consolidate power. The fault lies with the force that caused the social instability. Essentializing sermons about authoritarianism, cultural difference, and historical mythology are always transparent attempts to deflect attention from real historical causes and the complicity of the powers that paint themselves as innocent champions of justice.

Gorbachev was promised that NATO would not expand eastward, and yet it did. The current conflict in Ukraine traces its depth causes all the way back to the way in which the Soviet Union collapsed. Putin is painted as the cause but in reality he is an effect of historical and social forces whose destructive impacts on the Russian people were praised in the United States and Europe as the triumph of “freedom.” Freedom, politicians tell us, requires sacrifice, but they never ascend the scaffold to pay the price they tell others it is necessary to pay. As winter approaches and the real costs of energy prices begin to be felt in the shivering bones of Europeans, who will benefit from the growing instability? The more hopeful see the Ukraine crisis as an opportunity to accelerate the Green Revolution. The more likely beneficiary, at least in the short term, will be Far Right reactionaries.

## Unsettled Autumn Skies

Originally posted, 2 October, 2022

On [Sept. 1st](#), I asserted that the most likely political beneficiaries of the intensifying conflict in Ukraine would be far right reactionaries. Since I posted that argument, far right parties have achieved electoral success in both [Sweden](#) and [Italy](#). In the later case, the head of a party with historical ties to Mussolini is set to become Prime Minister. And yet, even as the forces of extreme reaction occupy the political vacuum created by the exit of centre-right and social democratic parties from objectively rational positions, those same centrist parties continue to cheerlead a war that will only prove more costly to everyone the longer it continues.

And continue it certainly will, in perhaps even more violent and geographically extensive form. The bombing of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines is a literal and metaphorical burning of bridges between Russia and the West. There is no solid information available to determine who might have been behind the attack. A “who benefits” approach to puzzling out an answer leads straight to the United States. Indeed, [a Polish diplomat](#) (in a now deleted tweet) thanked the US for destroying what was an important economic lifeline and symbolic connection between Russia and Europe. [Biden](#) himself said, on February 7th, in a comment that now sounds much more ominous, that Nord Stream 2 would never be allowed to function if Russia invaded Ukraine. That the bombing took place as referenda were being held in the four Ukraine regions with majority Russian speaking populations is ,no coincidence. Whether Putin orchestrated it as a false flag to try to bind (his increasingly restless) population to a war effort which, if not collapsing, is certainly faltering, I cannot say. If he did order it then it will prove to be as tactically stupid as the invasion of Ukraine was strategically stupid. As with all allegations, one should withhold judgement until [the evidence](#) points unequivocally to one side or the other, but the attack certainly strengthens the US project of replacing Russian gas with American Liquefied Natural Gas.

Putin has said as much. However the investigation turns out, it will not alter the balance of forces. In an attempt to strengthen an ever weakening hand, Putin has now formally annexed the four Ukrainian regions. The annexation announcement of Sept. 30th doubles down on the very unwise bet he placed when he decided to invade Ukraine on Feb 24th . This move makes a negotiated settlement of the conflict unthinkable in the short to medium term. Indeed, the only way in which negotiations might become possible is if he is removed from power. With the full and continued backing of the US, NATO, and EU there is no chance that Ukrainian forces will be firmly and finally defeated on the battlefield. A decisive victory over Russian forces is also unlikely, but not unthinkable given what appears to be collapsing morale in the Russian army. I do not share some commentators fears that Putin would resort to (or would be allowed to resort to, even if he decided to try) nuclear weapons. Any use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine would spell the end of the Russian Federation (and perhaps civilization, if the nuclear exchange became an all out nuclear war). A more likely scenario, given that Russia, a middle income country of 140 million people is locked in a conflict with a US/NATO/EU bloc of almost 1 billion people and wealth orders of magnitude greater than Russia's, is a gradual bleeding dry of Russia.

Astoundingly, they have been led into the very trap that finished off the Soviet Union– the war in Afghanistan that ended up a proxy war between the US and the Soviet Union.

What follows for Russia will be a prolonged period of international isolation and punishment. The model for what Russia will face after this miserable conflict finally ends is Iran. No matter what Iran has done or not done, whether it elects reasonable reformists or violent, brain dead fundamentalists, the response of the US is the same: economy strangling sanctions and collective punishment of the population. Enemies are simply too useful in domestic politics to easily give up, even when they are willing to negotiate and change.

Putin seems to be banking on the construction of a bi-polar world in which the BRICS countries counter-balance the global might of the US. His recent [speech](#) announcing the ascension of the four Ukrainian regions to the Russian Federation was full of anti-colonial rhetoric that harkened back to the days when the Soviet Union funded and armed the major revolutionary insurgencies against US imperialism. While that history is real, Putin’s argument abstracted from Russia’s own colonial past and ignored the quasi-imperialist relationship between the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries it controlled. No one in Europe is going to accept Putin as a later day Che Guevara boldly fighting for the emancipation of oppressed peoples.

That is not to say that there is not a [genuine separatist movement](#) in the Donbas. The problem is that referenda cannot be carried out in active combat zones. There is little doubt that were legitimate and properly scrutinized referenda held in the territories that Russia will now annex there would be a significant degree of support. How widespread no one can say at the moment, but Russian-speaking and Russian- identifying populations are not a figment of Putin’s imagination, just as French-speaking people in Quebec identifying as Quebecois first and Canadian second (if at all) are not figments of the imagination of the Parti Quebecois. The Western media have simply erased the actual history of the lands and peoples of Eastern Ukraine. Putin did not start the Civil War in 2014, US backed far-right Ukrainian nationalists started the conflict. [Zelensky](#) was elected on a pro-peace platform. He would have been wise to pursue his stated agenda after his election.

Nevertheless, now that war has been chosen, the outlook for all sides look increasingly grim. Putin’s wager on creating an effective Russia-China axis against US/NATO/EU hegemony looks as unwise as his initial bet on the “special military operation.” As I assumed it would in February in my early analysis of the conflict, China has tread a very careful line ([see Poker 101](#)). It continues to purchase Russian energy, but it has not otherwise helped Russia to evade sanctions. The Chinese government has made it clear in word and deed that its primary duty is towards its own national interests. Those national interests align with Russia in so far as China has its own reasons to counter-US hegemony (it wants access to global resources and markets). However, global success for China depends upon continued economic growth and social development, both of which depend upon its economic relationship with the US. The much maligned (in the West) Communist Party of China has thus adopted one of the few politically coherent positions on the conflict: a cessation of hostilities and negotiations that respect both Russia’s need for security guarantees and the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The position of the CPC can be gleaned from its articulate and straightforward organ for international relations, [The Global Times](#), but people

in the West seem to prefer to eat the pablum of propaganda from US and European mainstream media than than to listen to what the rest of the world has to say for itself.

So a war for which there was a ready-made solution (enforcing the Minsk 2 agreements that Zelensky claimed to have accepted plus security guarantees for Russia which would have cost the US and NATO nothing) continues. Despite triumphalist rhetoric in the West, the costs to Ukraine have been high: thousands killed, millions displaced, the economy in even more of a shambles than it was prior to February, crackdowns on opposition parties and effective martial law. For Russia, the costs have mostly been borne by soldiers, but the domestic costs will multiply. The hole that Putin has dug will get deeper. Already ordinary Russians have been vilified and demonized. Absurdly and inhumanely, European countries are trying to prevent Russians fleeing the draft from seeking refuge across their borders. That response will come as no surprise to Africans mourning the thousands of their fellows who have drowned in the Mediterranean because of EU migrant policies.

There will be no glorious son of York to rescue Europe from its self-imposed winter of discontent. The mainstream media repeats– without actually reviewing the history- the US/NATO/EU line that this war was unprovoked. On the contrary, it was provoked by decades of pointless NATO expansion. Putin is to be faulted for being stupid enough to take the bait, arrogant enough to think he could win, and ruthless enough to keep pushing in chips when he should long since have cut his losses and go home. Having got what they wanted (a Russia nearing the second humiliating defeat of the past 30 years), the Western powers might also get what they did not want (a Europe dominated from the Atlantic to the Black Sea by the far right and fascists).

## The Year of Killing Needlessly

Originally posted 22 February, 2023

There is little evidence that the first anniversary of the Ukraine war will be its last. As generally happens, an inconclusive battlefield hardens political positions and entrenches conflict. NATO continues to pour weapons into Ukraine, Putin continues to warn against doing so (although his speech on February 22nd sounded weak, like a man who has no cards left to play but has sunk so much money into the game he cannot walk away). The destruction of human life is always to be lamented, but this war is particularly troubling because it did not have to happen.

Wars are caused when objective conflicts reach a point where one party or the other decides that their best option to attain their goals is to launch an armed attack. Analysts have the luxury of standing outside the conflict and are able to analyze its historical development in a way that partisans cannot. Looking at the buildup to the war it becomes clear that there were three pivotal moments which, had different decisions been taken, today's war would have been averted.

The first opportunity was in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. The United States could have declared victory and dismantled NATO. The alliance, having been constructed to oppose the Soviet Union, had no further reason to exist after the latter's demise. Unfortunately, the logic of international relations does not obey the abstract logic of disinterested historical judgement. The material and ideological investments required to sustain a military with global reach generate their own inertial pressure. Russia could easily have been absorbed into the Western orbit on the Canadian model: a large, cold mine and oil well pumping energy and resources to the manufacturing sectors of Europe. That was indeed the German model for relations with Russia, but in the United States Cold War suspicions continued to shape policy, even when they no longer made sense of the objective conditions. But political thinking shapes reality to conform to its own needs. State department and Pentagon planners continued to regard Russia as an adversary even in a state of utter (Western encouraged) economic collapse. Putin was a godsend to those planners: he arrested Russia's political-economic free fall and gave some plausibility to their argument that Russia remained a strategic threat to US interests.

The second opportunity was the decision to expand NATO eastward. Maintaining NATO was one decision, expanding it was another. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union the Soviet leadership was given explicit guarantees that NATO would not expand east of the Oder river. [George Kennan](#), the US ambassador to the Soviet Union at the time warned that all parties in Russia, liberal or conservative-nationalist, would view the Eastward expansion as a direct threat to their security (on the basis of quite ordinary realist assumptions about spheres of influence). Drunk on Cold war victory triumphalism, the US pushed NATO eastward regardless, spurred on by the historic Russophobia of the Baltic countries and Poland. Their animosity towards Russia and the Soviet Union is entirely understandable, but historical grievances rarely make a sound basis for wise contemporary policy. Sadly, the Ukrainians and Russians dying in



combat in 2023 are witness to the arrogance of the decision to begin NATO expansion in the 1990s.

The 2008 war in Georgia should have been interpreted by all parties involved in the current war as a sign that Russia would actively resist further NATO expansion, but it was not. After the 2014 US supported coup against pro-Russian ties President Yanukovich, the anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalist faction that came to power began angling for NATO membership, heedless of the lesson that Georgia taught. The attacks that the new government allowed to occur against Russian speaking Ukrainians in the Donbass (the main theatre for today's conflict) sparked a [civil war](#). Two sets of agreements (The Minsk accords) were negotiated between Ukraine, France, Germany, and Russia. The Minsk accords were the third opportunity to avoid war, but these, it turns out, were negotiated in bad faith by Ukraine and its western allies. [Angela Merkle](#) surprisingly let the cat out of the bag last year. She admitted that the Minsk accords were not designed to bring lasting peace, but to buy Ukraine time to strengthen its army.

In any case, the Minsk agreements, whether by design or accident, failed to halt the civil war in Donbass. A week before the war broke out, Putin (in a move that I argued was strategically unwise) recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. On February 24th, he doubled down on his error and invaded. Western denials and proclamations of innocence notwithstanding, Putin clearly felt pushed to the breaking point by the history of steady NATO expansion eastward. He had every reason to fear the eventual inclusion of Ukraine. But feelings and fears are one thing, decisions are another. Objective conditions produce crises; decisions produce war. The West bears primary historical responsibility for creating the objective conditions that led to war, but Putin bears historical responsibility for making the decision to start it. I argued at the time and still maintain today that his decision will go down as one of the greatest strategic and political catastrophes of the last one hundred years.

Russia has entered into a proxy war with the largest economies and most sophisticated militaries on earth. One hears worries even from NATO countries about dwindling stocks of materiel, but there should be no doubt that these countries can produce all they want should they choose to prioritize it. If the Military-Industrial Complex is urging the war forward, one can be sure that they can deliver the goods that will deliver the profits. Losses on both sides are difficult to gauge with any accuracy, but there is little reason to doubt that they have been enormous. Millions have been forced from Ukraine as refugees. The "People's Republics" that Putin claimed to want to liberate (and has now annexed) have been completely destroyed. A wave of xenophobic Russophobia has washed across Europe and an already toxic far-right Ukrainian nationalism has become even more determined in its myth-making attempts to erase the reality of the Russian presence in the history of Ukraine. They have no gone so far as to [remove millions of Russian books](#) from Ukrainian libraries. Imagine if Quebec separated and the library of Parliament decided to remove all the French-language publications from its holdings. We are talking about historical revisionism on an almost unprecedented scale.

But the war never had to start. Four decades of mostly American geo-political decision makers will also have to answer (to historical analysis, if never to a court or tribunal) for the decisions that they took that created the conditions that led to the war. The current generation will have to



answer for theirs as well, but they have not only contributed to the conditions that made war an option, they share responsibility for the killing and destruction.

We now know that there were not only three possibilities to make different strategic decisions that would have led to very different relationships between Russia, Europe, and the United States. We also know that there were two opportunities in the first weeks of warfare to reach an agreement that would have ended the bloodshed. First former Israeli Prime Minister [Naftali Bennet](#) and then Turkish President [Tayyip Erdogan](#) believed that they had worked out a framework of security guarantees for Ukraine and Russia combined with autonomy but not independence for the Donbass that the Ukrainian and Russian governments could accept. But of these agreements were scuppered by the West.

In cynicism there is truth. By undermining these potential agreements the US, the UK, the EU, and NATO showed their true colours: what matters to them is strategic advantage, not Ukrainian (or Russian, or any) life. Life is valuable only as an instrumental input into a grand geo-strategic design. Perhaps if there were something worth protecting in that geo-strategic design one could accept the calculus of life and death according to which it operates. But it protects a political economic system, globally and within the borders of different nations, of monstrous inequality. It continues along its unsustainable path of energy use despite the known dangers caused by climate change. And it has churned through the lives of millions of people in the Middle East, North and East Africa, and Central Asia in the so-called War on Terror. It has started wars of choice more egregious and deadly than the Ukraine conflict. And it has impeded the swift resolution of this conflict, ensuring that the war will continue and likely intensify over the next year. The longer conflicts go on, the more entrenched the parties become because they look at the sunk costs the war has produced and conclude that if they do not keep going they will have expended lives and resources for nothing. The continuation of the war is active nihilism, producing nothingness (non-living bodies, non-existent cities) from once living and functioning societies.

Some critics of the West want to see this conflict as some sort of heroic struggle against US imperialism. At the strategic level there is some factual truth: Putin is opposed to NATO expansion because he believes that it is encroaching on Russia's legitimate sphere of interest. His decisions are readily understandable in classical realist international relations terms. What Putin is not is any ally of oppressed people and workers anywhere. To liken this struggle to the national liberation struggles of Viet Nam or colonized African countries is an inversion of political reality almost too historically ill-informed to contest. Putin has attacked Russian workers' movements and democratic forces. He brutalizes and demonizes sexual minorities. Read his [most recent speech](#): he champions a triumphalist right-wing nationalism that enlists the most reactionary forces of Orthodoxy to uphold a suffocating conservative vision of social relationships. His decision to go to war has isolated Russia, imprisoned its youth within its borders, and cut its economy off from the technologies it will need to develop beyond an extraction economy whose future can be measured by the amount of time it will take to pump the last cubic meter of gas and dig out the last ounce of nickle from the ground.

The same abstract anti-imperialists who see Putin as some sort of ally by default of oppressed peoples point to the refusal of India, China, and most of Africa and South America to stop

trading with Russia as signs of an emerging anti-imperialist bloc and forerunner of a new multipolar world. There is no doubt that these regions are opposed to US imperialism and have every reason to be so opposed. The Chinese especially favour a multipolar international world order. But anti-US imperialism might liberate elites; it does not translate mechanically into what matters: the liberation of people from poverty, violence, political authoritarianism, and reactionary nationalisms cloaking the real agenda: protection of the power of the existing rulers. Russia's allies are happy to purchase energy at artificially discounted prices because of the sanctions, but beyond that none have shown any willingness to help Russia evade the other embargoes it is facing. Sergei Lavrov summoned the ghosts of the Soviet Union's support for anti-colonial struggles in a recent speech in Africa, but the nationalist forces that led those revolutions have mostly given way to neo-liberal regimes in much of the continent. Russia did not have African colonies, that is true, but Imperial Russia did colonize the Baltics and Eastern Europe. Putin makes much of the Great Patriotic War against the Nazis, but stays silent about the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that Stalin signed to keep Russia out of the war (and stake a claim to parts of Poland).

Much has also been made of the way in which US policy is pushing Russia and China together. However, a careful analysis of [China's position](#) reveals that it has been— as is usual for China— extremely cautious. China has not been caught systematically violating the sanctions, there is no evidence that they are supplying sophisticated semi-conductor technology or weapons, and their major banks have been careful to not run afoul of Western sanctions. China rightfully criticizes American attempts to dominate the globe and it needs energy from Russia. However, its manufacturing industries require access to the US market and global technology flows. There is no evidence that the Chinese leadership is going to return to its Maoist roots to lead a crusade against the capitalist running dogs. It wants to run with those dogs.

In sum, the war has been a catastrophe. It has killed tens of thousands of people, destroyed cities, forced millions out of their homes, destroyed the Ukrainian economy, driven an inflation crisis that is undermining the income security of workers around the globe, and spread hatred and xenophobia. The meddling of clowns like Boris Johnson has destroyed the possibility for a workable federal solution to the Donbass crisis, all for the sake of weakening a Russia that was in no sense a strategic competitor to the West. So-called statesmen like Johnson are too cowardly to fight (the Ukraine has a foreign legion, remember, in which people who are serious about wanting to defeat Russia can help make it happen). Instead, they cheer-lead the sacrifice of Ukrainian and Russian lives from a safe seat in the pub. Last week former US Secretary of Defence [Mark Esper](#) admitted to Russian pranksters the truth about the war: it is about bleeding Russia dry, using Ukrainians as sacrificial victims. But if life is only valued in so far as it is sacrificed for the cause, then its value increases the more martyrs there are. A perverse logic, but one whose operation the world has been observing in real time for a year.

## Philosophy and War

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In his correspondence with Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi argued that when “there is war, the poet lays down the lyre ... The poet will sing the true note only once the war is over.” (*The Mahatma and the Poet*, 93). Note that Gandhi does not say that when war comes the job of the poet is to rhapsodize about the glory of armed conflict, but that the poet has to stop composing verse and contribute to the cause. Gandhi thus implies an opposition between war and poetry. When there is war, there is no time for verse. But war is not something to be celebrated but endured and overcome. The true note can only be sung after the conclusion of hostilities.

I think something similar can be said of philosophy. If it comes to a fight then the philosopher, as a member of a community under attack, has to put down their pen and fight alongside their comrades. In other words, where war begins, philosophy, like poetry, ends. The poet does not glorify and the philosopher does not justify; they fight, if they must, for the the restoration of the conditions in which thought can unfold and verse can be composed free from fear and violence.

I was motivated to reflect on these issues by an article I read by a philosopher who abandoned his work to take up arms in Donbass. I am not judging his decision to fight, but I do question his understanding of the relationship between philosophy and war. [Andrey Korobov-Latintsev](#) argues that philosophical argument is analogous to war and philosophical education akin to military training:

“For a philosopher, the military path – the path of war – is quite natural. In reality, such a scholar is always engaged in this process – the conflict of ideas. He understands that war is the forefather of all things and since he is looking for the origin of everything, turning to war, both as a subject and an element of existentialism, is natural.”

Heraclitus argued that all things are born of strife, but strife comes in many forms and is not necessarily military in nature. But setting aside the historical question of whether or not “war is the forefather of all things,” Korobov-Latintsev is wrong to draw an analogy between the conflict of ideas and armed violence. In truth, they are opposites, not analogues. The conflict of ideas leaves both parties to the dispute standing; military violence tries to kill the enemy. War begins where argument fails. One might say that war is the failure of philosophy, and not, as Korobov-Latintsev implies, philosophy by other means.

I would go further: philosophy is not, first and foremost, a conflict of ideas, but a search for the most important truths of human existence: where did we come from, what is our purpose on earth, how ought we treat each other, are shared values possible, are there definitive answers to these questions? Philosophy begins, as both Aristotle and Descartes noted, in wonder. Before we answer, we question, before we categorize, we are open to what presents itself. We look to the heavens in awe, feeling insignificant and unique at one and the same time. The universe is immense and we are as nothing. And yet, the stars- distant, silent, beautiful- cannot ask

themselves about their place in the whole. Only we can. And so far as we know, we are the *only* creatures who ever could, can, and will be able to ask those questions.

Real questions, questions posed from a position of receptive openness, are peaceful. The interrogator's questions are violent, but they only ask what they already know. Their question is meant to intimidate, to terrify, to elicit the confession that will justify the punishment that has already been decided. The philosophical question is peaceful: knowing what they do not know, philosophers open themselves to the universe and ask it what it all means. Not hearing an answer, they go in search of others for help until they find a truth. Having found it, they do not keep it to themselves but immediately share it with everyone who is willing to listen. Openness to what presents itself and a desire to share the truths that have been found: those are the dispositions of the philosopher. As Plato argues in *Gorgias*, philosophers have a "thirst for victory when it comes to knowing what the truth is," because the truth is "a good, common to everyone." The philosophical victory does not leave the enemy vanquished, bloody, and dead on the battlefield, it elevates everyone by showing them what they really need to *live fully*.

Korobov-Latintsev traces the origins of "just war theory" to Plato. I am not sure what work he is thinking of, but Plato does discuss the origins of war in *The Republic*. However, his goal is to understand its causes, not to justify one side or the other. War breaks out, Plato argues, when a society becomes motivated by superfluities. Once human desires grow beyond the basics of what we need to live we become undisciplined and greedy, and once we become undisciplined and greedy, we require more resources. Once a society exhausts its resource base it must appropriate that of a neighbouring society. War is the means by which others' resources are seized.

Plato is not concerned with the justice of war. According to the definition of justice he later defends, all wars would be unjust because they ultimately result from a disharmony in the souls of those who demand more than their fair share. If anything, Plato tries to understand the causes of war so that armed conflicts can be avoided. Certain desires and policies make war necessary, not just. But since people can reflect upon and change their motivations, this necessity is embedded in a deeper layer of contingency. Given a set of unquenchable desires as motivations, people will demand ever more resources. People come into conflict with their neighbours, in other words, because they are in conflict with themselves. Cure the malaise in their own souls, Plato implies, and they will live in peace with others.

Whatever one thinks about the details of Plato's politics, I think that these arguments continue to teach us important lessons. They teach us that the aim of philosophy is not to justify either side in a war but to understand its causes. Philosophy, like poetry, is a peacetime pursuit: if philosophers want to promote the conditions in which everyone can reflect on the fundamental problems that shape our time on earth, then it is our job to contribute what we can to the solution to the underlying conflicts that start wars. Plato's account of the origins of war is speculative but contains an important truth, confirmed time and again in history: resources are at the root of most large scale conflicts. If no group ever sought to appropriate the lands and labour of others, there would be no war. Demonizing and chauvinistic ideologies arise to justify armed violence but they are rarely its cause.

Unless philosophers want to accept the truth of those ideologies then they are obliged by their vocation (to understand the causes of events) to oppose argument to violence. It is never the part of a philosopher to justify one side or another in an armed conflict, because the existence of the armed conflict is proof that rational argument has collapsed into a hardened conflict between one-sided positions. That philosophy is opposed to war does not mean that philosophers are indifferent to injustice or believe that victim groups should simply accept whatever treatment their tormentors impose on them without fighting back. People have the right to protect themselves and their societies.

But philosophy, as fundamental inquiry, serves the cause of justice by working beneath particular arguments pro and contra war to draw attention to the underlying drivers. Unless we are satisfied with a world where the solution to one conflict immediately gives way to another somewhere else, then we need the sort of abstract, general inquiries into causes that philosophy can provide. The point is: one or another side may have legal and moral right on its side, but philosophy is not concerned with that historical question but the deeper problem of how members of the same species, who share fundamental needs and capacities, who prove themselves capable of understanding one another and getting along, degenerate into violent conflict.

Thus, we should approach the problem of war in the register of necessity, not justice. If a society's lands are invaded, if their people are enslaved, then they will fight back. The right of self-defence follows from the physical necessity of self-protection. But having exposed the particular histories that lead up to the outbreak of warfare, I argue that philosophers have to go one step further to expose the deeper layer of contingencies from which necessities emerge. I mean that historical events are never absolutely necessary. Given decisions a, b, and c, d becomes necessary. Philosophy re-traces this history but argues that while d follows from a, b, and c, a itself was not necessary. If instead of a, b, and c, the group had chosen policies 1, 2, and 3, then 4, not d, would have followed. Philosophers have the difficult task of trying to walk their fellow citizens back to the moment where there was a *real choice* between a and 1.

For fulfilling this duty philosophers can expect to be attacked. They will be denounced as fence sitters, or worse, enemy agents. But philosophy does not sit on the fence. It is militant and partisan, but on the side of truth. Unless someone looks out for the truth: not the truths that link a, b, and c, but the deeper truth, that different values and goals lead to different possibilities and that reason can uncover common ground, then we will be condemned to stay stuck in the cycle of armed violence. Different combatants will rotate in and out but the wheel of destruction will always be setting one or another part of the globe on fire.

Korobov-Latintsev concludes that wars are ultimately justified by their results. He points to the principle of “‘jus post bellum’ (rights after war),” explaining that “this means that the world after the war should be better than the world prior to the war.” However, he does not specify the time frame for analysis. Over a long enough time frame, the traces of even wars of extermination will fade. One might argue on this basis that World War Two was justified because it gave rise to the EU, the UN, and catalyzed anti-colonial revolutions. But note; we are justifying the war to living people, not to the people who fought and died in it. *If* there was a way to create international institutions that, at least in principle, offer legal and diplomatic alternatives to war, *if* there had

been alternatives to colonization, *then* the world that would have followed had they been chosen would have been better than the world that followed the war, because the same good results would have been achieved without the deaths of 60 million people. The people who died fighting for the cause would have been alive to enjoy the benefits.

Yes, but philosophy must deal with reality or consign itself to irrelevance, my opponent will say. In the real world people must fight. Talking about what might have been the case is a cowardly distraction from the battlefield action. Even a pacifist like Gandhi recognizes the necessity of war.

Too true, I respond, philosophy does deal with reality, and sometimes one must fight. But reality is not so simple as the historical links between choice a and consequence b. Human reality is a field of possibilities. Once Frost's traveler on a snowy evening has chosen his road, the alternative disappears behind him. The politician is like the traveler after he has had made his choice: to him, there never was any other road. But although it cannot be seen from where the traveler ends up, there once was another road, *and he knows it*. Philosophy is the reminder that the other road was real.

## Fear the Reaper?

Originally posted 18 March, 2023

The [downing](#) of an American Reaper drone over the Black Sea represents a dangerous new escalation in the proxy war between the US, EU, NATO and Russia. For months, analysts have been warning that as American and European involvement grow, the chances of a direct conflict between Western forces and Russia becomes more likely. While both sides, predictably, paint a different picture of the causes of the crash, the most salient point is that two Russian warplanes intercepted an American drone gathering intelligence (most likely, to be shared with Ukrainian forces) and during the intercept the drone crashed. Whether it was deliberately brought down or not, its crash has constricted further an already tiny space in which the parties might maneuver their way onto the path of a negotiated resolution of the underlying causes of the Ukraine proxy war.

In the immediate aftermath, the military leadership of both the US and Russia took care to trade blame in such a way that avoided rash escalations. That caution did not prevent [other politicians](#) from the usual adolescent boy posturing. Lindsey Graham, from the comfort of his oak chair in the US Senate far from the battle zone, demanded that the US down Russian interceptors, while on the Russian side the Ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov reminded his US counterparts that Russia retains the world's largest nuclear arsenal. Absurd as it is from an abstractly rational perspective, there is not much dance floor left before the US and Russia waltzes the whole world into a nuclear war.

And for what? I have [already](#) argued in [previous posts](#) over the past year that the stakes of this version of the Great Game are not rooted in objective security threats to either side. The justification of the eastward expansion of NATO by appeal to a post-USSR Russian threat was geo-political cover for a economic incorporation of the former Warsaw Pact countries into the orbit of American and European capital. But that was going to happen regardless of any military re-alignment, because there was no where else for Eastern Europe to go. The economically rational course of action (from the capitalist point of view) would have been to incorporate Eastern Europe as a low-wage sink for Western European capital and treat Russia as an arms-length supplier of cheap energy to European industry. To some extent that was the situation that existed prior to the start of hostilities in Ukraine. But that economic relationship (which, by the way, satisfied Putin) was always in tension with: Polish and Baltic national chauvinism, which could not let go of its fear and hatred of Russia's imperial (Tsarist and Soviet) past, and the inertial force generated by a massive American military and diplomatic machine programmed during the Cold War to require adversaries to the global hegemony of American interests. From the perspective of the American state department and military, it is as if the Soviet Union never collapsed.

The persistence of the ideological power of the idea (both within America and its client states) that America is the "indispensable nation" (Madeleine Albright) is the depth cause of the current war, as it was the depth cause of the wars across the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia that America has started or involved itself in, from the First Gulf war (1993) to the present. The

American behemoth seems incapable of changing course, even when its policies, objectively considered, help turn its purported friends and allies countries into rubble.

The Ukraine war conflict seems destined to continue to devolve further into intractability. After a year of war the losses on both sides have been so high that the logic of conflict demands that they both keep going. The spiral of destruction ensures that there will be greater losses on both sides. There is no evidence that either side can make a decisive breakthrough. The fact that hundreds of thousands of Russians fled the country rather than risk being conscripted seems to have warned Putin off any further attempts at mass mobilization, while the supply of Western weapons is too piecemeal to decisively tilt the balance in Ukraine's favour. More than a century after the end of the war to end all wars, two armies are entrenched, lobbing artillery shells at each other and making furtive attempts at advance. One side creeps forward and is then pushed back. To what noble end? De-nazification and de-militarization of Ukraine? Ukraine is more militarized now than before, and nothing promotes national chauvinism than the need to resist and invasion. Pacifying the Russian threat? Russia is all in now, and, backed into a corner, might very well consider turning the conflict nuclear. Both sides have created the conditions to get exactly the opposite of what they claimed to want. Thousands of miles away, American arms merchants count their super profits over drinks at their California country clubs.

While American arms industries might be reaping a windfall, the outlook for the American and European economies is far from rosy for working people. American employment numbers are strong, but the collapse of the Silicon Valley bank could turn out to be the first act in another banking led. I do not understand [all the details](#), but the problem with the Silicon Valley bank is that the value of its investments were compromised by the Federal Reserve's interest rate policies. When depositors saw the balance sheet they worried that the bank might become insolvent, causing them to stampede to get their money out. Had people not withdrawn their money there would have been no problem, but once one depositor starts withdrawing another is influenced to do the same until a cascade effect is generated. If that process repeats at other banks a generalized banking crisis will follow.

Some say: "So be it, let the banks collapse." These people tend not to work in the productive economy. If the banks collapse their financing functions collapse. Without financing, business cannot invest. If businesses do not invest then unemployment rises, spending decreases, and recessions or worse are created.

So, let's build socialism! Indeed, we need to build socialism, but when we search the North American and European landscape we realize, to our dismay, that most of the social democratic left (by far the largest contingent of leftists) has lost its political bearings. In Germany, we have the sad spectacle of a coalition which includes members of the Green Party, whose historical roots were in the environmental and peace movements, cheerleading war in Ukraine and accepting the need for new investments in coal to stave off a German energy crisis. German industries are leaving the country because of skyrocketing energy prices, a process that is playing out across Europe. It is true that there have been impressive mobilizations in France against raising the pension age, but the problem with the pension age is a function of deeper structural forces at work in the French economy (it's population is aging, like most populations in the Western world, and demonstrations alone cannot change the demographic forces at work). What



France and everyone requires is a different economic system which can actually plan for and manage long term energy and demographic adjustment, but there is no coherent political movement capable of winning power and initiating those deep structural changes.

The complicity of most of the left with the US-NATO agenda in spurring on the Ukraine Russia conflict has allowed the far-right to occupy the space that the left should be occupying to explain the depth cause of the crisis and propose solutions. Of course, understanding the depth causes does not mean supporting Russia. War is not a spectator sport in which observers cheer for one side or the other. Those not directly party to the conflict have to refuse puerile “which side are you on” rhetoric and instead dispassionately expose the deeper historical drivers of the war and do what they can to promote its earliest possible cessation. To do otherwise strengthens the right, in Russia, in Ukraine, and across Europe. There was a reason that the Greens were born from both the environmental and peace movements: any further intensification of the direct conflict between the US and Russia threatens nuclear war, and nuclear war will not be good for the life-sustaining powers of the natural world.

Dying empires rarely do down quietly. The US empire seems to be in its dotage, but a “multipolar” world will not necessarily be better. The distribution of international hegemony is not a criterion of better and worse. A multipolar world is not better than a unipolar world if the values that drive each of the multiple centres of power treat the world’s regions and peoples as mere labour to be exploited. If Chinese capitalists exploit labour they are no better than American capitalists. Bullets kill, not abstractions like “nations.” It matters not to the corpse which regional imperialist power pulled the trigger: dead is dead.

What the world needs is thus not multipolarity as opposed to unipolarity, but a new international movement focused on creating the global conditions for good human lives: social peace, life-coherent energy and resource policies, re-channelling investment funds from production of the means of death to production of the means of life, comprehensive satisfaction of the fundamental needs of each and all, respect for and free interaction between the world’s different peoples. Collectively these are the material conditions for the realization of the highest end of human life: enjoyment of life time expressed as the free development of our capacities for receptive openness to the world, creative and critical thought and action, mutualistic relationship, and opportunities to contribute to the well-being of others, now and in the future.

## Bogart and Biden

Posted on September 11, 2022

My favourite scene in the classic Bogart film *The Maltese Falcon* takes place towards the end, in Sam Spade's office. Bogart's character, exasperated with not being able to extract information from the lackey of the gangster he is investigating, backhands him across the face and exclaims: "When you're slapped, you'll take it and like it." Spade's threat is a perfect expression of the morally inverted world in which the powerful live. The exercise of power demands not only the ability to dominate others, it also demands the belief that the righteous violence of the powerful is for the good of the people they dominate. Sam Spade doesn't slap Peter Lorre's character, Justice itself delivers the beating.

Not everyone is capable of this level of self-delusion. People who do not exercise political power typically have a healthier and more modest understanding of right and wrong. Even if they are relativists, they are capable of making a distinction between that which is good for themselves and that which is good for others. Power erases this distinction. The person or group capable of exercising power over others must convince themselves that no matter what they decide to do, the decision is good for those it slaps, undermines, or destroys.

The powerful believe that those who are its objects should be grateful for whatever they are forced to undergo. They believe that good and bad are whatever they—the person or group capable of determining the objective conditions of others' lives—decide are in their own interests. Even if entire economies are destroyed or people wiped off the face of the earth the victims (or their ghosts) should rejoice, because if you are the object of power, then when you are slapped, you should take it and like it.

For the past six months the American government has polluted the airwaves and internet with Cold War platitudes about Russia's threat to the free world. Decoded, what the blather really means is that Putin has 'got above his 'raising.'" He has mistaken himself for someone with the prerogatives of power and needed to be reminded that he leads a loser-state whose role is to obey. Only America (and its clients in Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) can use other nations and their people as their instruments. Only they get to tell people that when they are slapped they will take it and like it.

Iraqis, Afghans, Somalis, Pashtuns in the tribal areas of Pakistan, Libyans, and, further back, the peoples of Central America and Viet Nam, and back further still, the peoples of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Cuba, and Mexico should all be grateful to have been killed, conquered, driven from or dominated on their own lands by American power. They were being liberated from their own mistaken belief that they had the right to determine their own societies.

Today, Iranians are the latest to be blessed with the benign destructiveness of American diplomacy. To no one's surprise it seems as though the bi-partisan anti-Iran faction in Congress and Israel will get their way and Biden will refuse to re-enter the JCPOA agreement. The current leader of the Israeli apartheid state was positively glowing as he posed in front of an [F-35](#) warning Iranians that a day of military reckoning will soon be at hand. Biden the next day asked

the Pentagon to draw up plans for ‘[other means](#)’ of preventing Iran from acquiring a bomb it claims not to be developing.

Sick Iranians will go to bed happy knowing that they will continue to be deprived of medicines by the philanthropy of American sanctions. Blessed are those who die by American power.

Critics who are struck by the parallels between the foreign policies of American administrations supposedly marked by deep ideological differences often invoke the “deep state” to explain the continuity. But “deep” structures cannot be seen, and so invoking them invites the charge of indulging in conspiracy theory or being the dupe of foreign propaganda. But if we drop the ‘deep,’ just use ‘state,’ and point to the available evidence, the charges of conspiracy and brainwashing are exposed as red herrings.

Where is the fundamental difference between Biden’s and Trump’s foreign policy? He continues to bomb Syria. He has been more belligerent towards China. He has maintained the sanctions regime against Iran and will likely refuse to re-enter the JCPOA. Would Trump’s policy on Ukraine have been different? Despite liberal fantasies that Trump was in the pocket of Putin, the reality was that Trump was an early and consistent opponent of Nord Stream 2 and continually warned Germany about the dangers of over-reliance on Russian gas. One can never be certain about hypotheticals, but the evidence suggests that Trump would have jumped at the opportunities to increase American LNG sales to Europe and weapons sales to everyone that the Ukraine war has created. Trump presented himself a brash iconoclast on foreign policy, but the reality was that he toed the line when push came to shove.

He had no trouble confronting Russia in Syria. I doubt that he would have pushed peace in Ukraine. (But had he, that would have been for the best). Instead, it seem that [Boris Johnson](#), no doubt with the complicity of Biden, actively scuppered a peace deal brokered by Turkey in March. Ukraine’s successful counter-offensive will no doubt embolden them to keep fighting, but, given the stakes for Russia six months in to the war, Ukraine’s success will most likely force them to re-double the destructiveness of their tactics, with who knows what consequences for the region and the world.

But, when you are slapped, you will take it and like it. The recent events on the battlefield are unlikely to improve prospects for European energy security over the winter. Political storm clouds are gathering: 70 000 people protested in Prague, demanding that the interest of Czechs in affordable energy should outweigh solidarity with Ukraine. The rally was sponsored by movements on the left and right and it remains to be seen who will benefit most across Europe. But with the social democratic left captured by Cold War Russophobia, the right seems better positioned to benefit from Europe’s coming winter of discontent.

## GOFAR

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Let me begin by apologizing to earlier generations of Artificial Intelligence researchers for playing with their acronym GOFAI (Good Old Fashioned Artificial Intelligence) to create my own: GOFAR: (Good Old Fashioned Abstract Reasoning). The growing irrationality of the world keeps drawing my thinking back to the political importance of learning how to listen, to reverse perspectives, and to make coherent, well-supported arguments that do not presuppose the truth of their conclusions. By “irrationality” I mean two things: the choice of policies which demonstrably lead to outcomes which are the opposite of the stated goal, and the reduction of truth to a function of partisan political commitments.

Let us consider some examples. The conflict in Ukraine can be understood in geo-strategic and political-economic terms as a continuation of the post-WWII struggle for American hegemony. However, geo-strategic plans and political economic forces do not make decisions. People with power do. Putin faced a situation which, in realist International Relations terms, was intolerable. The US and NATO threat to incorporate Ukraine was a legitimate *causus belli* for Putin because Ukraine lay within Russia’s historical sphere of influence. His stated goal was to increase the security of the Russian Federation, but the actual outcome has been to dramatically reduce it. His conventional forces have been exposed as disorganized, he has provoked the expansion of NATO to Finland and soon Sweden, and has isolated his country from major markets and sources of the technology that his economy will require if it is to develop beyond resource extraction (as it must, since resources run out).

At the same time, US and NATO forces have provoked a war to weaken an adversary that an abstractly rational consideration of the geo-strategic situation would have concluded was no longer an adversary. In fact, prior to the Maidan uprising (supported by the US and EU) which led to threats to the Russian speaking population of Eastern Ukraine, a stable and economically mutually beneficial relationship had developed between Russia and the EU. Despite the evidence that Putin was not bent on conquering Europe or “democracy,” the United States egged Ukraine on in its provocations against Russian speakers in the East. Instead of defeating Russia in short order by collapsing its economy, the policy has led to the destruction of vast swaths of Ukraine, a massive exodus of refugees, and the likelihood that any negotiated solution will cost Ukraine at least chunks of its eastern districts. No side got what they wanted because all pursued a maximalist agenda and refused to think from the perspective of the other.

Instead of meddling and a precipitous decision to go to war, a rational approach to the situation would have created the conditions for dialogue and negotiations geared towards some sort of federal solution to the ethnic tensions between Russian and Ukrainian speakers. Such approaches are not only possible (there were two accords to stop the Civil war, but they were violated by the Ukrainians), they can also work. The US has not seen the need to invade Canada to deal with tensions between French and English speaking Canadians. The relative autonomy of Quebec in matters related to language and immigration prevents tensions from exploding into civil war.

If an interest in social peace were the basis of reflections on the best policy to pursue, then war would not have broken out in Ukraine. But *real politik* divides the world into friend and enemy encampments. These encampments construct closed worlds marked by antithetical understandings of history each of which regards its interpretation as absolute. Instead of an imperfect federal Ukraine we have the return of trench warfare to Europe 105 years after the end of the war to end all wars and the ratcheting up of nuclear tensions to their highest pitch since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

No doubt many harder headed and harder hearted realists will find my appeal to GOFAR naive. It is not naive, it simply refuses to accept that people must act as geo-strategic pressures push them to act. There will never be solutions to fundamental social problems if people are nothing but functions of objective forces. In order to break free, the relevant actors must stop believing that their perspective is the absolute truth. GOFAR urges opponents to sit down, articulate their respective needs and interests, and work out a relationship that is not perfect but that everyone can accept. Perfection is the enemy of accomplishing one's ends: had a framework of mutually acceptable accommodation been worked out and adhered to in Ukraine, ordinary people would have done as they always do: get along, for the most part, with their neighbours.

GOFAR can also help solve the problem of the policy paralysis caused by entrenched political differences. The second form of social irrationality occurs when truth is reduced to a function of partisan political commitments. The current spectacle surrounding the Trump charges exemplifies this second form of irrationality. The charges, brought by a Democrat DA with a history of legal wrangling with Trump have reinforced the Manichean divisions in American politics. Democrats think that justice is being served, Republicans that the charges are a political hatchet job. Who is correct?

That depends upon who asks the question. That fact exemplifies the problem from the standpoint of GOFAR. Republicans and Democrats currently exist within two parallel universes of their own construction. Each universe reflects one part of the true situation, but, since it excludes the other side, represents only a partial understanding of the whole. The Democratic DA must have *some* evidence to back up his charges; but the Republicans are correct to note the historical entanglements of this DA with Trump. More generally, politics has always influenced the judicial system, but both sides in the US (and political forces everywhere) have always used power to sway judicial decisions. When there is conflict, the side that thinks they have the upper hand appeals to universal norms (justice) while the weaker decries what they see as partisan abuse of the system.

Take a second example of this form of irrationality: the 'culture wars' that erupt in American society every 30 years or so. GOFAR can also help solve these battles too. As with the criminal case against Trump, the opposed sides are quick to assume the righteousness and truth of their own convictions. Ron DeSantis sanctimoniously assures his supporters that he is restoring the integrity of the education system when he fires the board of a small liberal arts college in America. The administration of Hamline University likewise sermonizes about their commitment to "inclusivity" when they fire a professor for teaching the realities of Islamic art history. Transactivists purportedly acting on the principle that transwomen are women violently attack

women, while Tucker Carlson proclaims that transgenderism is opposed to Christianity. Examples could be multiplied almost without limit.

GOFAR invites the parties to the conflict to once again consider the implications of the principles that their positions presuppose. Both De Santis and the administration at Hamline argue that they are saving education from partisanship, but both clearly act in partisan ways, De Santis reduces “America” to supporters of his version of Republican family values and the Hamline administration conflates “inclusion” with pandering to particular, anti-intellectual interests. From perspective of GOFAR, the issue is not which set of values is right or best, but the deeper question of whether either have anything to do with the governance of educational institutions. The dispassionate answer is “no” because educational institutions serve educational values and no others. They are open spaces for the free, critical inquiry into the value and truth of all productions of the human mind and hand and the totality of natural forces and phenomena. No one can draw a line around any doctrine and say: this string of words or experiences is sacrosanct. Communities can distinguish between the sacred and the profane in their communal life, but in universities nothing is above questioning and reflection.

The same sort of response will help move along the debate about the extent to which transwomen should be accepted in spaces that women have constructed for themselves over the years (women’s sports, rape crisis centres, women’s health clinics, etc). If one advances the argument that transwomen are women, one thereby commits themselves to the objective reality of ‘women.’ If there were no such thing as women, then there would be no question of including transwomen in that set. So then the question becomes: what is a woman? Whatever else women are, they are defined by their biological differences from men. If human beings were amoebas, sexless blobs who reproduce by fission, there would be no debate. There are no trans amoebas because they are not distinguished by sex characteristics.

Any coherent definition of “woman” therefore must begin with undeniable biological realities, as these are the origin of all the gendered distinction that culture and history have introduced into the world. However, as generations of feminists going back to Wollstonecraft have understood, biological differences get converted into gendered characteristics under the influence of patriarchal power. Women are made and not born, as De Beauvoir argued. Feminist movements have articulated themselves in different ways over the centuries, but there would be no feminism had their been no oppression of women. There would have been no oppression of women had their been no women, and there would have been no women if there were no male and female sexes.

These considerations do not solve the concrete problems. They form the starting point for coherent and productive debate. One cannot argue that words have whatever meaning one wants them to have *and* demand that others accept as objective fact one’s chosen identity *as* a member of a class whose existence presupposes a definite meaning of the word that names the set to which one claims to belong. If ‘woman’ means whatever anyone wants it to mean, then it means nothing, and there can be no debate, pro or contra about who counts as women. On the other hand, if it means anything, its meaning must relate to the evolution of the sex differences which have biologically and historically distinguished women, *and made them targets for sexist and patriarchal domination*. At the same time, social and historical developments modify the

practical implications of objective facts. In the 16th century women were not usually educated in Europe because the prevailing construction was of a “feminine” character that was too emotional and sentimental to benefit from rational education. No one could rationally define such a position today.

The androgynous ideal that stemmed from a certain history of feminism has today given rise to a (at its best) more playful and open construction of gendered identities as fluid and responsive to subjective mood and feelings. Material realities about male and female are not threats to a playful approach to gender; but they do mitigate against the cogency of arguments that there simply are no differences between females and trans women. Different bodies mean different health care concerns, for example, and different feelings of vulnerability for which women’s only spaces were constructed.

GOFAR does not solve the practical problems about how to redraw the boundaries of institutions in light of changing interpretations of gender identities. Instead, it highlights the common ground from which conversations must begin and the presuppositions and logical implications of the opposed positions. When opponents see the underlying formal common ground they are better positioned to arrive at mutually acceptable conclusions. No side is correct in advance.

GOFAR always begins by examining the underlying reasons that explain the positions that different sides take. The first concern is not to take one side or the other, but to reveal to the opponents the one-sidedness of their respective positions. When opponents confront each other as in a mirror (left is right, right is left) a reversal of perspectives becomes possible. The mirror reveals that the position of sides is not absolute but relative to perspective. When I look at myself in the mirror right appears to be left and left appears to be right, not because anything about my body position changes, but only my perspective on it. What matters is not the relative perspective, but the parts of my body.

If I could debate with my mirror image and we were both locked into our own perspective as absolute, we could never reach agreement about which side is which. But if we shift the debate from which side is which to what the purpose of body parts is, then we could make some headway. From my perspective, the fact that the hand that he calls left I call right does not change the more basic fact that hands are for grasping objects. What is more important, the function of hands, or the adjective that we apply to them? Would you cut your hand off to support an argument that it is ‘really’ the right when your mirror image calls it the left?

I did not think so. Thus, GOFAR can help solve the intractable conflicts of partisan politics by inviting both sides to think about the purpose of the institutions over which they clash. The purpose of the justice system is to impartially enforce the law for the sake of social stability and ensuring the integrity of the rules that all citizens must accept. Equality demands that all citizens, rich and ruling class or poor workers must be subject to the rule of law. If one does not accept the universality of the norm, then one cannot criticize opponents when they fail to respect it. Hence, criticism of the other side presupposes acceptance of a universal norm. GOFAR uncovers this presupposition and insists that conflicts be resolved by consistent practical inferences from its application to particular cases. When suit is brought against someone, no matter who they are, the charges must be heard and judgment rendered.

Ah, the hard-headed cynic will respond, justice is never blind, but always favours the ruler class. Thus, what we need is a revolution that overcomes class power. *Then* justice will prevail. I would respond that if the premise of the argument is true then justice cannot prevail because there would be no such thing as justice. Just as the common expression “they spoke their truth” undermines the normative force of truth, so too does the idea of class justice undermine the normative force of justice. If everyone speaks their own truth then there is no truth. But when people assert that they are speaking their own truth they want others to accept that they are speaking the objective truth. But the objective truth holds independently of one’s subjective perspective. If there is such a thing as truth, then it is the ground against which subjective stories are tested. If one argues that there are only stories and no objective grounds for their truth, then one has no grounds to criticize other people’s stories when they conflict with one’s own. So too justice. If one believes that justice coincides by definition with one’s own perspective, then one must accept that the other side will think the same and will with equal right use their power to when they have sufficient power.

Situating itself on the grounds of objective truth and universal justice, GOFAR treats all particular claims as testable and invites opponents to consider their own perspective in light of the evidence. Objective truth and universal justice are not defined by content but are formal principles that can be applied by anyone to test their own and their opponents claims. Opponents committed to truth and justice and not the victory of their side *assumed without argument* to be true and just will agree to abide by the conclusion of the mutually agreed best argument. Society can then solve problems and not spin its wheels endlessly in partisan conflict.

The goal of all politics is to legitimate a certain structure of rule as best for the citizens who live within it. In this view, the goal of political struggle is not first of all to defeat an enemy to but to secure control over state institutions for the sake of implementing policies that satisfy the conditions of meaningful, enjoyable lives for all. Where political life is hardened into fixed and fast positions, where one side is assumed to have truth on its side just because it is one’s own side, and the other is mendacious and ideological just because it is the other side, constructive agendas become more and more impossible to pursue. Every issue trivial or profound immediately divides the state into political languages that cannot be translated into each other. This split is not between the immense majority of people on one side and a small ruling class on the other, but into ideologically opposed blocs that cross class lines. The only winners are the ruling class, whose interests are served by both sides. GOFAR does not stand on any side just because it is a particular side but tries to work down to the shared interests beneath ideological oppositions. Its impartiality serves the interests of truth and truth cannot be opposed to the shared interests of people.

An enemy whose forces are of roughly equal size and power to one’s own cannot be defeated by force. Not only social stability (a merely instrumental value), but more importantly, progress in solving the core social problems of our day: substantive inequality and its effects on education, health, and political voice), climate change and related environmental problems, and the effects of what one might call the spiritual malaise of liberal-capitalist society as manifested in people’s withdrawal into self-curated virtual worlds, “silent quitting” at work, and a cynical suspicion that nothing is as it appears depends upon winning over the other side. The only way that opponents can be permanently won over to the other side is through argument.



Attacking people's beliefs and trying to change them by force generally produces a hardened reaction. If one convinces one's opponent by argument, then one converts the other into a friend (as Spinoza argued). Friends combine forces and conjointly develop their power to attain their ends and enjoy their lives. With rational dialogue between friends comes the understanding that truth is not a function of one's own commitments but objective states of affairs to which the thinking of rational people is attuned and which must ultimately decide the day when there is disagreement.

As Marx said, in practice, human beings must prove the truth, and there is no proof without argument.

## God Doesn't Give a Shit About Women's Hair

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In 1678 Spinoza exposed the impious nonsense at the root of all forms of religious fundamentalism. His target was the religious version of the Aristotelian doctrine of final causes: the position that all things in nature happen for a purpose and so as to be for the best. The religious version maintains that final causes were created by God: God created the universe *for the sake of* human being. Since, however, those purposes are not always obvious, the ways of God require human decoders: a priest class that maintains its power over people by its purported special ability to see the workings of divine intelligence in all events.

Spinoza's view- for which he was expelled from the Jewish community of Amsterdam- was that there are no final causes, manifest or occult, in nature. Hence, there is no need for a priest class to tell us what events "really" mean. Nature is governed by natural forces which each person, as a rational being, can understand for themselves. In order to exercise their understanding they must recognize that God is not a big bearded father in the sky; God is, literally, the power and necessity that manifests itself in natural processes. The traditional predicates that are ascribed to God: all-seeing, all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful are real predicates, but not a person, but of nature as a whole. There is nothing that happens, nothing that is knowable, nothing that is possible, outside of the universe. Spinoza believes that his conclusion follows straightforwardly from the traditional definition of God (in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). He also knew that it would be violently resisted by religious authorities, precisely because it would divest them of their authority and re-invest it where it should have been all along: in the rational intelligence of each human being.

"Hence anyone who seeks for the true cause of miracles, and strives to understand natural phenomena as an intelligent being, and not gaze at them like a fool, is set down and denounced as an impious heretic by those whom the masses adore as the interpreters of nature and the gods. Such persons know that, with the removal of ignorance, the wonder which forms their only available means for proving and preserving their authority would vanish also." (*Ethics*, Appendix, Part One)

The truly impious person is the one who loads onto God all manner of human stupidity, jealousy, cupidity, peevishness, anger, chauvinism, and petty hatreds. If God is perfect then God cannot care one way or the other about human beings, for if it did care, it would be affected by the outcome of human lives, i.e., change for the better or the worse. A being that can change for the better or the worse is not perfect, and therefore not God.

The rulers of Iran need to heed Spinoza's lesson. The current uprising being led by young Iranian women is not, as the conservative leadership maintains, the result of Western interference. To be sure, Western sanctions underlie the economic challenges facing Iranians, and the US will always try to exploit any crisis in order to gain geo-political advantage. But it is clear even from thousands of miles and a different cultural universe away that the protests have been catalyzed by the murder of [Mahsa Amini](#) for the "crime" of not having her headscarf adjusted properly. The women taking off their head coverings and cutting their hair in protest are expressing

solidarity with the murdered woman (and all the women murdered by the regime over the years). They are not demanding capitulation to America but freedom from the violence and oppression imposed upon them by the fundamentalist regime.

There are few certainties in political life. Here is one of them: any practice which must be protected by “morality police” is not moral. Moral prescriptions must be fulfilled because people have, feel, and accept a duty to abide by them. If rules must be enforced by violence— threatened or actual— then we are not in the land of duty but—as Spinoza understood- unequal political power.

Over millennia and across cultures, women have been the overwhelming victims of “morality police.” Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill came up with the definitive refutation in their classic of liberal feminism, *The Subjection of Women*. They asked: If, as sexists maintain, women really are inferior by nature, then why are legal restrictions imposed on them? Natural law does not require buttressing by positive law: the law of gravity simply operates, it does not need to be enshrined as a constitutional principle in order to function. Clearly, therefore, women’s oppression was a function of law, not nature. Whatever women’s nature is or is not, they concluded, cannot be determined until such a time as women were freed from the quite unnatural legal restrictions to which they were subjected.

From Victorian England to Iran, the lesson of history is clear: what women do or do not do, what they wear or do not wear, must be a function of women’s decisions about their lives and bodies. If traditional women choose to wear head scarves, great; if others choose not to, equally great. If others want to play with the traditional clothing and invent new ways of respecting old traditions, great again. If others play with new forms of expressing themselves beyond traditional confines, also great. State violence cannot suppress the most valuable principle of ethical modernity: that which pertains to the expressed identities of individuals must be a function of the convictions and actions of the individuals themselves. As Habermas might say, traditions must be reflectively appropriated. If people no longer feel an allegiance to a tradition it will change or die out. Any tradition kept alive by state violence is not a tradition but an ideological bulwark against needed social change.

The reflective appropriation of traditions is no more a threat to traditions or cultural difference than women’s being allowed to work outside the home is a threat to childbirth. Creating a free legal space within which women can choose to become mothers does not prevent anyone from becoming a mother, it simply stops forcing women to become mothers because “it is women’s nature.” Allowing gays and lesbians to marry does not prevent straight people from continuing to marry, it simply expands the legal space in which people might decide to get married. By like reasoning, allowing women to choose how they will present themselves in public is no threat to religious and cultural traditions that demand a certain public modesty of dress. If there is real value in those traditions, then women themselves will choose to perpetuate them. If they are not, then they will change and die out, as they eventually must, under the slow but relentless pressure of resistance that all oppressed groups exert, one way or the other, over history.

Ah, but God, but God, God says

Fundamentalists are lucky I am not God. I would invent punishments for them that not even Dante thought up for their impious projection of their own misdeeds onto me.

“Show me,” I would say, “where I put one group in charge to speak in my name?” And the things that you make me responsible for! Show me where I signed off on the Crusades? If I didn’t want you to eat lobster, why would I have created them? Is there a screen shot of me writing up different dress codes for different people all of whom claim to believe in the one God? I know what you look like naked, I don’t care how people dress. Bald, long hair, beards, clean shaven, it’s all good. I do not help you catch the football; I do not cause you to drop it. Thanks for the thanks for the food, but farmers grew it, not me, so thank them for their labour. I did not make one half of you for the sake of serving the other half. No one is superior or inferior, so don’t blame me for your racist doctrines. I do not look like anything, feel like anything, think like anything that resembles you. I have no room to offer you in my home, so live well while you are on earth, because that is all you get. I do not live one place rather than another so I do not care who wins your stupid wars, but I will advise that it is not worth dying in them, so stop starting them. I don’t go to church, so honour me by using the brains I gave you rather than imploring me to assist one group amongst you against others.”

“You have heard of Nietzsche, perhaps, and his madman running around the marketplace shouting “God is dead.” Do you know what he was really saying? He was saying that it was high time that human beings took responsibility for their own actions. You write the laws and enforce them, not me. If you write bad ones, you will suffer the consequences.”

Iranian citizens have peered behind the curtain and discovered, not God, but old men, wizards of Oz with no special insight into how things ought to be. How things ought to be is a function of our needs, achieving that goal requires shared intelligence and collective political work. There is nothing complicated or occult about what human beings require to live good lives. Every explosion of anger amongst oppressed people is a reaction against something vital of which they have been deprived. Existing authorities must either respond or be replaced.

## Democracy vs “Authoritarianism?”

Originally posted 3 April, 2023

From March 28th- March 30th the US State Department hosted a “[Summit for Democracy](#).” The Summit comes at a time when existing liberal democracies are under increasing strain: from persistent economic problems (low-growth, inflation, ever increasing material inequality), from sharpening polarizations fanned on both sides by culture war provocations, from policy gridlock as traditional centrist parties fail to secure enough popular support to push legislation in one direction or the opposite, and from a general malaise that is undermining the legitimacy of the major social institutions that have defined the liberal-democratic capitalist world for the past 250 years. Thus far, the right has been more successful exploiting the vacuum than the left.

In order to shift attention from the immanent tensions of liberal-capitalist democracy and to divert attention from the structural and political explanations of the far-right’s re-emergence, events like the Summit play on an argument that is gaining prominence: the main political fault lines are no longer between capitalism and socialism, but between democracy and “authoritarianism.” Stated simply and read unreflectively, the contrast appears stark. “Democracy” connotes freedom and self-determination while “authoritarianism” connotes domination and the reduction of citizens to mere objects of power. However, if we pause to reflect, it becomes clear that authoritarianism is, like “communitarianism” a category that seems to capture something novel but lacks real analytic value.

Communitarianism developed in response to what thinkers like Charles Taylor thought were the socially atomizing effects of modernization and secularization. Liberal philosophy started from the assumption that human beings were, in Locke’s words, *tabula rasa*, blank slates, governed by self-interest, and not beholden or fundamentally shaped by tradition. Rational people defined their own goals and were capable of freely negotiating with others (given a suitable legal framework) and thus managing their affairs without being babysat by a nanny state.

For Taylor and others this picture of society as a network of contracts between self-interested people seemed like a radically impoverished view of human beings when measured against the ‘thick’ (meaningful) traditions of earlier societies. Hence the “community” in “communitarianism.” Just as the invocation of ‘democracy’ without critical inquiry into its meaning and concrete implications is supposed to fire us up against the evils of authoritarianism, so too “community” is supposed to makes us feel safe and secure in the arms of comforting traditions.

The problem is that “community values” can be suffocating to people who live in the community but who do not share its values. Ask a gay man how how warm and fuzzy the community values of the small mining town in Northern Ontario where I grew up in the 1970s made him feel. I think he would answer that he would have loved a bit of space to freely negotiate his identity as a gay man. There were strong community bonds, but they divided insiders and outsiders. So do all communities. Even when they are not overtly racist or homophobic, they can be suffocating to a mind that wants to explore its world openly and without the ballast of the past.

My point is: whether a community is good or not depends upon the values that it serves, not on the mere fact of its being a “community.” So too “authoritarianism.” Political societies of any sort depend upon the authority of someone or something. Liberal democracy is supposed to be governed by the authority of law. The government of the day is sworn to uphold the constitution and the constitution is the fundamental framework which legitimates the creation of the laws that govern particular spheres of life. In a constitutional democracy the laws and not people rule, but those laws can be backed up by force (up to and including the death penalty, in those states which permit it). All constitutions contain a clause that allows for its suspension in times of grave emergency. The use of force to protect the authority of law is accepted in all actual democracies (and it is hard to imagine any workable society that does not contain some sanctions for deliberate violations of democratically decided upon laws). Does this make democracies “authoritarian?”

The defender of the relevance of the distinction will no doubt point to the rule of law and say: that is the critical difference. Authoritarian societies require an authoritarian ruler that substitutes decree for democratic deliberation and uses the powers of state to perpetuate their own rule. Aside from the fact that political parties tend to use their time in office to create conditions for the indefinite perpetuation of their rule (think of the role that gerrymandering plays in the US), this argument assumes, in a way analogous to the communitarian assumption discussed above, that the institutional form of a society determines its superiority to other societies, independently of the question of how life goes for its members.

One of the main tasks of the “Summit for Democracy” is to bolster support for Ukraine in its war with Russia. Purportedly, the mere fact that Ukraine is “democratic” and Russia “authoritarian” justifies unlimited financial and military assistance to Ukraine and a proxy war against Russia. Underlying this support must be the principle that the conflict, no matter how destructive it becomes, is good for everyone just because Ukraine is a “democracy” and Russia “authoritarian.”

But why should life take on more or less value relative to the type of state in which one lives? Was it right to kill or create the conditions for the early death of millions of people across the Middle East, North and East Africa, and Central Asia during the “War on Terror” because they had the misfortune of living in “authoritarian societies?” Why should we feel anymore allegiance to the peoples of democracies than peoples who live in non-democratic societies? They have the same needs as we do, the same general capacities and possibilities. What is it about this particular institutional structure that imposes a duty of solidarity on people who live in other instances of that structure? Shouldn’t solidarity be a function of the recognition that some group of people is being systematically deprived of the goods their lives require, or are being targeted and destroyed (often, as in the case of Palestine, because their demands are said to threaten ‘democracy.’) If ‘democracy’ is compatible with collective punishment, detention without trial, random armed invasion, and indiscriminate bombing then ought not life-loving people oppose it?

Consider a thought experiment. Society A is nominally democratic, but marked by monstrous inequalities of wealth, life-expectancy, and accessible opportunities for each and all to make meaningful contributions through valuable and enjoyable work. Society B is run by an “authoritarian” who denies people the right to vote but has reduced wealth inequality, has raised

living standards and life expectancy equally for all, and uses public wealth to reduce labour time and distribute opportunities for meaningful contribution through challenging and enjoyable work. The inequalities of Society A generate wide-spread anxiety and ill-health on the one hand and breathtaking levels of inter-personal violence on the other. The relative equality of Society B makes people feel secure about their and their children's futures. They relate to one another as friends rather than as threats. Which society is better?

If one answers A because it is democratic, then I would like to know just what it is about this political form that makes it better than the other society whose social content leads to— at least on the surface— better lives. One might answer that political participation is truly human while basic need-satisfaction is important but only a material condition of exercising our deliberative powers in the public sphere. Hannah Arendt made that sort of argument in *The Human Condition*. Setting aside the fact that most citizens of actually existing democracies are uninterested in politics save when it touches on their more narrow interests and that what passes for debate is at best platitudinous and at worst tendentious partisanship, why should this form of human activity be elevated to such pre-eminent importance that it is worth killing to protect?

I can think of no reason why one form of political organization is better than another independently of the question of what sorts of lives it makes possible. Nevertheless, I can think of one reason why “democracy” might be of greater life-value than other forms of organization. Society B above is a thought-experiment. In real life, societies that do not allow ordinary people any political voice would most likely not fully satisfy their needs and enable the full and free development of the life-capacities of each in a spirit of friendship amongst all. Historically, undemocratic societies have rested upon status hierarchies that justified the domination of some groups because their needs were assumed to be less exigent than the needs of the ruling group and their capacities less noble. Struggles for democracy are always struggles against this form of invidious hierarchy.

However, democracy in the sense implied by struggles for the comprehensive satisfaction of the needs of each and all is not a political form. It is neither embodied in the English Parliament, nor the United States' Congress, nor in the Athenian *agora*, nor in the People's Soviet of days past. In the sense implied above, democracy is a set of social relationships in which all contribute freely and all appropriate freely in a spirit of egalitarian friendship. This model of democracy— democracy as a set of substantive social relationships and not a political form— reminds us that what is valuable in life is the range of experiences and activities its social organization makes possible. All other structures: political institutions, economic relationships cultural values and symbols, are legitimate if and only if and to the extent that they satisfy everyone's fundamental needs and enable them to experience and act in the world as subjects and not the more objects of power.

Societies which call themselves democratic and allow political choice but rest on exploitative social relationships, which fail to ensure the satisfaction of the fundamental needs of each and all, which provoke and engage in bellicose rhetoric or worse with other nations and waste resources in armed conflicts are not democratic by the criterion above. Societies can call themselves whatever they want: politically speaking, what matters is not words and names but substantive results.

## Once Again on the Importance of Academic Freedom

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The ever-intensifying political polarization between “liberals” and “conservatives” (in the American senses of those terms) have occluded a clear understanding both of the nature and the importance of academic freedom. While some egregious and indefensible mobbing attacks on academics like Kathleen Stock (who had the audacity to argue that sex is biological reality that has important health and political implications for women’s lives- *quelle horreur!*) or the firing of Frances Widdowson by Mount Royal University in Calgary (because she questioned the dominant narrative around residential schools and the influence of Indigenous traditions on Canadian university campuses) provide grist for the conservative mill that universities have been captured by woke cry babies incapable of argument, the reality is that conservatives are a far bigger threat to academic freedom.

If anyone doubts this claim then they are not paying attention to news out of Florida. Governor de Santis has launched a full scale attack on the intellectual autonomy of Florida universities. His warm up exercise was to fire the entire board of the small liberal arts focused New College of Florida and replace it with Christopher Rufo as Chair and hand picked Republican supporters. The new Board, under the guise, of course, of political neutrality and academic rigour, threatened to fire professors and eliminate programs that adopted a critical perspective on contemporary American reality. This move came after he forced the closure of an accelerated program on [racial history](#) on grounds that it teaches (generally undefined, by its opponents) Critical Race Theory. The new Bill before the Florida legislature threatens to go [much further](#):

“The legislation, filed this week, would also require that general education courses at state colleges and universities “promote the values necessary to preserve the constitutional republic” and cannot define American history “as contrary to the creation of a new nation based on universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.” It would prohibit general courses “with a curriculum based on unproven, theoretical or exploratory content.”

The [American Association of University Professors](#) is right to warn that if passed, the very existence of Florida universities as centres for free inquiry and argument would be threatened. If taken at its word, the last set of provisions would lead to a ban on string theory and other scientific theories “based on unproven, theoretical or exploratory content.” It would also rule out courses in art and creative writing that demand students go beyond established canons of practice, because by definition, going beyond established canons of practice is “exploratory.” Indeed, what living tradition of thought, scientific, humanistic, artistic, or social scientific is *not* exploratory at its leading edges? And if universities are not exploratory at their leading edges, they serve little purpose.

In any discipline, one studies its past *in order to go beyond it*. History does not simply transmit facts about the past. Historical research uncovers new documents, gives voice to excluded perspectives, and re-interprets settled interpretations in light of the continued effects past events and ideas have on the present. De Santis’s bill, aimed as it obviously is at what he takes to be left-wing biased research, would quite literally destroy Florida universities. They would become



mere transmission belts of hackneyed republican interpretations of American history that no serious student of that country of whatever political persuasion could accept. One might argue that the constitutional norms enshrined in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution establish a sufficient political foundation for solving the problem of racism, but how could anyone who impartially examined the evidence disagree with the basic argument of Critical Race Theory: America was shaped by the slave economy and its effects are felt in the structure and operation of every American institution and the daily reality of African Americans still today?

Perhaps someone would disagree with that reading of the evidence. Excellent. If they have a better interpretation, they should be encouraged to share it. And then defenders of Critical Race Theory can respond. What cannot happen without destroying the university system is for state power to rule one side of the debate illegal and ban it. No one on the left that I know of is proposing that left-wing state legislatures ban the teaching of classical liberal doctrines of formal equality or making courses that argue that America gave the purest expression of those principles illegal.

There have indeed been overzealous demonstrations by students and faculty that have prevented right-wing speakers from speaking. Demonstrations and counter-argument are one thing, preventing speakers from speaking is another. The Stock and Mount Royal cases are more serious because they resulted in the two academics losing their positions. These are egregious violations of collegiality and academic freedom that not only threaten the intellectual integrity of the university but provide ammunition for the right wing. We can be certain that de Santis's frontal assault on the independence of universities will be [replicated elsewhere](#). And if the Republicans are elected in 2024, perhaps with de Santis as leader, maybe with trump. watch out.

But does my argument not depend on a naive belief in the political neutrality of knowledge and universities? No, it does not. I have a sound understanding of the history of Western universities in general and the role that ideological justification of the status quo (first the hegemony of the Catholic Church in medieval society, then various imperialist projects and capitalist modernization) have played in their development. Major American universities would not have the wealth that they enjoy if they were not the recipients of massive amounts of military funding. Universities are integral parts of the knowledge economy, which is an integral part of capitalist society, which remains contradictory in all the ways past generations of critics have noted.

Universities are also contradictory institutions. Since the nineteenth century they have been an essential component of national development strategies, but they have also provided space for the critique, from a variety of perspectives, of those development strategies. In the 1960's the (now mostly anachronistic) image of the campus radical professor emerged in a context where students were leading the movements against imperialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and the soullessness of a future dominated by stratified corporations and the 'company men' who ran them.

That critical function of universities is as essential to their history as their function in preparing the next generation of national leaders. Without academic freedom, universities would not have been able to play that role. However, like every right, it cuts both ways: it protects the rights of

radical critics to freely articulate their criticisms, but it also protects the right of critics of radicals to criticize in turn.

Academic freedom is thus not *essentially* a principle of radical criticism or a conservative tool to “repressively tolerate” critique within polite limits. It is a principle that has developed to allow the contemporary university to exist as a space for free intellectual inquiry into anything that can become the object of intellectual inquiry, including the past histories of the various disciplines, the exclusions that have shaped them, and the limited range of voices formerly allowed to speak. Universities are not indoctrination zones for any political perspective. At their best, universities enable students to learn to think critically and independently, to compile and assess evidence, to test principles for coherence and consistency, and to reason, analytically and critically, about the operation of major social institutions and the value systems that guide them (as well as imagine alternative value systems that might guide them in a different future).

Education is not about learning how to mindlessly chant slogans, whether from the left or right. As Marx argued, the question of objective truth independently of human action is a scholastic question: in practice, human beings must prove the truth. But if they are going to prove the truth (whether in physics or philosophy) they have to be able to think: gather evidence, draw inferences, expose contradictions, propose novel syntheses. Learning to think also involves— and this point proves painful for dogmatist of the right and left— to accept that other people think differently. The university provides a space in which those disagreements can be solved rationally, through open debate and comparison of arguments pro and contra. Peoples feelings simply cannot get in the way of this exchange. Education is a not a safe space: it is a conflictual space in which different positions confront one another and accepted truths of any sort contested.

Argument is hard. Listening to counter-arguments that cut against values that define your commitments is painful. De Santis’s bill shows us how *not* to deal with the problem. Making a theoretical position illegal does not make it go away, as he would hope, but it does destroy the integrity of institutions that are vital for any contemporary society, however one believes that it should be run. But shouting down a person with whom you disagree does not make their position go away either. More likely, it strengthens it because it allows conservative politicians to argue that there is nothing backing up critical perspectives other than shrill, irrational moralism. Since the right tends to be far more ruthless when it wins state power than the left (compare Margaret Thatcher to Jeremy Corbin, Trump to Biden) the left has a pragmatic reason to protect academic freedom. But beneath that pragmatic, must lie a deeper commitment to the belief that the truth will out. If our theories are ultimately the more truthful, then we need to develop them through through open inquiry alongside competing theories and “prove their truth in practice” through and sharp but peaceful argument with our opponents.

## The Death of Art

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When it comes to any artwork, the only questions that the artist should ask before they release it to the world are: do the parts fit together in the context of the aesthetic logic of the whole; and do they contribute to the unified effect they are striving towards? The question can never be: will they offend? Once artists start censoring themselves for fear of public opprobrium, art is dead.

Art is killed by the desire to please or conform to public political sensibilities not because its function is to offend, but because its function is to push. Art does not push a particular political line but rather the limits of experience. Art expands the human sensorium; it changes the way we see, hear, feel, touch, and smell the world. It enters into conflict with the commonplace and cliché because it is the result of our creative power. Art that simply repeats what everyone already accepts, or conforms to the limits of polite sensibility is not art because it is not creative. “Creative” does not mean “shocking” or “scandalous.” It means that existing elements of meaning and expression (words, brush strokes, musical notes, etc.) are combined in such a way that something unprecedented is produced.

In order to exist as art, all such creative works must be submitted to public judgment, evaluation, and criticism. However, being open to judgment, evaluation, and criticism, they must also withstand it. If a work cannot withstand criticism it was not yet ready to enter into the world. If it was ready to enter the world, it must hold its own regardless of what critics and people at large think.

To withdraw a work from circulation and instrumentally revise it to accommodate complaints is quite literally the death of art— the extinguishing of the power of creation by the fear of censure and the need to conform.

The liberal left pretends that “cancel culture” is a figment of the right’s imagination. If only that were true. Every week brings new whinging demands for artists to withdraw works that for whatever reason offend sensibilities. These demands are not only politically reactionary, they stem from a deep misunderstanding of the language of art.

Let us consider a few recent examples.

Last week, [Beyonce](#) agreed to remove the word “spaz” from a recent release because it was deemed “ableist.” That she would do so is perhaps explicable by the fact that she is a pop artist and does not want to incur the commercial costs of alienating her fans. Such an explanation does not work, for two reasons. First, and most importantly, pop artists are artists. Second, all art has a commercial dimension. Any artist who makes concessions, either for the sake of sales or to appease critics ceases to be an artist.

The problem runs deeper than any particular artist’s reactions to criticism. When critics seize upon a word like “spaz” and argue that it should be removed because it is offensive, they completely misunderstand the language of art. The language of art is not literal: a word, an

image, a sound are not chosen by an artist to convey a literal meaning; they are chosen because they help solve a problem specific to the art work. Hence the words do not convey the same force of commentary on the real as they would if they were used in everyday speech. A racist character in a novel is not a racist, because they are not real people but characters whose ‘life’ serves a literary function. The literary function is neither to celebrate nor condemn racism: any work of art which is that literal fails as art. The literary function of characters, as with the elements of any form of art, is to contribute to the realization of the work as a whole. They are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ not according to whether they express ‘good’ or ‘bad’ character traits, but according to whether they contribute to the successful realization of an aesthetic whole. This distinction, upon which the existence of art depends, is continually ignored by the chorus of the perpetually offended. Any artist who withdraws or revises a work simply because a group of the public is incapable of distinguishing the referents of artistic and ordinary language ceases to function as an artist. If “spaz” was the right word then it was the right word and Beyonce should have stuck by her decision. If it was not the right word then the song should not have been released until the right word was found.

The stakes are higher than the lyrics of pop songs. [Documenta 15](#) was disrupted by a complaint a large work by the Indonesian art collective Taring Padi contained caricatured portrayals of Jewish people and was [antisemitic](#). The piece in no way advocated violence towards Jewish people or any other group. The collective [apologized](#) and explained that the work was meant to criticize the violence of the Suharto regime. The content deemed antisemitic resulted from their exploration of the connections between Suharto and Mossad. The Artistic Directors— another Indonesian art collective, ruangrupa— agreed to first cover the mural and then remove it. Documenta is no pop song but one of the most important international art festivals. That the organizers gave in to pressure and that the artists themselves felt compelled to apologize is sad but not shocking testimony to the failure to understand the dangers of censorship.

As with the racist character, the artistic use of caricature has to be judged in the context of its contribution to the art work as a whole. Jewish comedy abounds in caricatures of Jewish characters, but these are not normally denounced as antisemitic. They are not antisemitic not because they are typically written by Jewish comics, *but because they are not commentaries on Jewish people but characters written for humorous effect*. The same reasoning must be applied in the Documenta case. The goal here was not humour but political criticism. One might object that the criticism was rather too obvious and literal, but regardless of how one assesses the work, the only relevant question is: did the figures work coherently within the art work as a whole? If so, they are valid in the context of the piece, and the organizers of the show should have defended it.

The validity or otherwise of art works does not mean that they are above criticism. *But criticism is the opposite of censorship*. Criticism— at least good criticism— engages with the work, perhaps exposes weaknesses that artists can then push beyond in subsequent efforts. The danger of the Documenta case is not that the removal of this particular work is another successful attempt to link political criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism— although it is that— but that it reveals that aesthetic illiteracy has penetrated the highest echelons of the art world. If they do not understand that censorship does not solve political problems like ableism or anti-Semitism but just kills art, who will stand up for the integrity of art work?

The public has a right to criticize, not to remove or question the right of art works to exist. Another recent controversy involving a new work by one of England's most important sculptors, [Antony Gormley](#) saw students at Imperial College London complaining that they were not "consulted" about the installation of the new work. No wonder, and than god they were not. Some complained that the work was too "phallic," reading a large square protuberance from the lower middle of the structure as a penis. Gormley contested that reading. That he bothered to engage with this puerile philistinism speaks positively to his character, but the debate is beside the point. One must read the sculpture first of all as a sculpture, as an arrangement of material parts to produce a certain formal coherence *which can be interpreted in different ways*. No one interpretation— including Gormley's— is correct. Any art work worth erecting— (no, not in that sense!) in public should generate discussion and debate. The problem with the student objections (aside from its crass, unthinking literalism, thin-skinned over-sensitivity, and platitudinous, prudish moralism) is that they assume that they should carry the day. Their position is thus as dogmatic as it is mindless. Fortunately, the school has refused their request to remove it.

Remember when student's led the struggle for free speech and the free exercise of the artistic imagination? It is a sad day for campus politics when we have to rely on the administration to defend artistic creation.

But let's not get too excited about sensible administrators. They can still behave like tyrants. On the same day that the Gormley controversy was being reported the Royal College of Music suspended pianist [Alexander Romanovsky](#). Romanovsky performed with a Russian musician at the theatre in Mariupol that was the site of alleged Russian atrocities. The venue was sure to stir controversy, but art cannot push in the ways I discussed above if it is afraid of controversy. If administrators are afraid of risk, they should move to the City and work for insurance firms rather than run art schools. Since when do school authorities decide where musicians can perform or suspect their motives for performing? If the job of musicians is to play music, we have here a case of someone being suspended for doing his job. Or was it because he had the temerity to perform with a Russian?

When Benjamin Britten's War Requiem premiered in 1962 to consecrate the new Coventry Cathedral (the original was destroyed in World War Two), he included included a German soloist. The fact that its first performance occurred 16 years after the end of the war is besides the point. There would still have been many veterans and civilian victims in the audience, but Britten understood that music, perhaps more than any art, envelopes listeners in a shared experience that breaks down barriers. Peace requires difficult encounters. If music helps cross divides it has to go to the frontiers to work its magic. Writing to his sister about the Requiem, Britten said that he hoped it would make people "think a bit." The piece is powerful, but not powerful enough to force people to think.

Underlying each of these attacks on creativity and art work is the naive belief that if everyone were just nice and "inclusive" the problems of the world would go away. Aside from the irony that those who preach inclusivity are typically the first to loudly demand the exclusion of anything that they do not understand or enjoy, the belief is based on a profound misunderstanding of social change. Slogans and platitudes do not change the world. Nor does art, for that matter. Art changes sensibilities, hopefully in the direction of deepening desires for as

yet unexperienced forms. As senses and mind open towards the new and difficult, then might emerge the formation of people who demand a better world, one devoted to free expression, interaction, peace, and creative expression.

## Death of the Liberal Idea

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The liberal idea of society as a voluntary association of free, self-determining individuals was always contradictory. As the political form of emerging capitalist society, the liberal idea allowed for the subordination of individuals to new market forces even as it justified their freedom from medieval hierarchies. In making individuals responsible for themselves, it failed to distinguish between forces that individuals could control and those that they could not. Hence, its conception of freedom tended to be formalistic and abstracted from the material conditions of different people's lives. Moreover, the implicitly democratic idea of moral equality which it advanced was not matched with democratic practices and institutions. Liberal society expanded across the Atlantic on the backs of enslaved Africans and displaced and murdered Indigenous peoples. In Europe, women and workers were excluded from the halls of power.

Nevertheless, one must not underestimate the life-value of the liberal idea (as I perhaps did, earlier on in my career). As is most often the case in political history, one learns to appreciate the value of ideas and practices only when they are under attack. The telegraphed but still shocking decision of the US Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade* strips women of rights and re-subordinates their health care choices to the whims of state authority. The values of privacy and self-determination cease to be abstractions (much less fitting targets of abstract radical criticism) when their connection to the life and death issues facing real human beings come to the fore.

No political value is absolute and all must be measured along a continuum grounded in their service or disservice to the satisfaction of human needs and the development and free realization and enjoyment of human life-capacities. Human beings are members of societies, the broader web of life on the planet, and the material universe. These structures limit our power to successfully realize our choices, but the value of choice to a human life worth living should not be in question. To have no choice is to be the object of alien powers. Humans are not gods: we cannot think a world into existence. Nevertheless, if we are prevented from making choices, whether about our health care, our goals, our tastes, and our relationships, we cannot be subjects of our own lives. The struggle against alien powers, of which liberalism is a world-historical moment, is a struggle to create the social conditions in which our social self-conscious agency can reach its fullest scope.

Even as Cold war rhetoric about "the free world" and "democracy" pollutes public discourse in the wake of the war in Ukraine, freedom and democracy are in precipitous decline. But the causes of the decadence of the liberal idea are not imports from the authoritarian outside (Russia and China), but a product of internal forces. The liberal idea has exhausted itself because it cannot cope with the problems generated by capitalist social and economic forces. The endless and entrenched conflicts between liberals and conservatives in the United States, the "indispensable" nation, are the clearest signs of (terminal?) decline. The country seems almost evenly split into two entrenched and opposed camps neither of which can shift significant numbers of opponents to the other side. The country's politics (reflected with less intensity and violence in the rest of the liberal-democratic capitalist world), stagnates, fundamental problems go unaddressed (despite rhetorical effusions that suggest the contrary), and history seems to slide

backwards, to more repressive social forms domestically and a more overtly militaristic posture internationally.

The collective political correlate of individual self-determination in liberalism was procedural democracy. Since self-determining people live together in societies, they must find a way to coordinate their actions when their interests overlap. The public sphere is defined by those areas of common interest legitimately subject to social regulation. Where public rules are judged necessary for the conduct of private life, government have legitimate power to pass laws obligatory on all. These laws are consistent with individual freedom because necessary for the peaceful pursuit of individual interests. In the original liberal idea, the zone of public interest was to be kept to a minimum. As society grew more complex and as more collective agents mobilized against structural impediments to their living life as equals, the zone of public regulation grew.

However, the growth of the public sphere remained consistent with the liberal idea of individual self-determination so long as it could be connected with overcoming structural barriers to inequality. So long as the barriers targeted were procedural, liberalism remained consistent with itself. That is, so long as what social movements did was reveal contradictions between principle (all humans are moral equals) and practices of excluding different groups (women, Blacks, workers, sexual minorities, persons with disabilities) from equal access to resources and political power, they could advance along liberal lines.

However, when demands to make principle and practice cohere came together with demands to change the way wealth was produced and distributed, when substantive demands were advanced as the material conditions of meaningful procedural changes, liberalism split. The current conflict in the United States is portrayed as a conflict between liberals and conservatives but the use of both 'liberal' and 'conservative' is idiosyncratic and unique to American usage. American conservatives are really classical liberals in the nineteenth century mould, defenders of *laissez faire* capitalism and opponents of rights to substantive equality. The current conflict is thus long in the making: in the US, it goes back to seminal moments of the past 150 years: opposition to radical reconstruction in the South after the Civil War, reaction against FDR's New Deal, and horror at the upswell of militant feminism and back power in the 1960s.

The fault line along which liberalism split was the interpretation of equality: is equality merely a matter of formal rules (everyone must obey the same rules) or is it a function of the way in which the rules affect the material conditions of different people's lives. The corollary of this tension was the question of how groups are to be understood: are groups essentially collections of individuals, whose interests alone count, or are groups emergent social realities with collective interests of their own?

For the past fifty or so years this internal conflict has been the primary driver of political tension in the liberal-democratic capitalist world. Philosophers like John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas have done heroic work trying to develop an interpretation of liberalism that would allow the two sides to be reconciled. The fruit of their work takes the form of the "deliberative" idea of democracy. This interpretation sees democracy as rooted in argumentative practices oriented towards the creation of legitimate law. Legitimate law has both procedural and substantive



dimensions. Laws are legitimate that are passed in conformity with the appropriate rules, but in a democracy those rules must ensure that all interested parties are allowed to participate in the deliberations that lead to the passage of the law. Since there are material barriers to participation, procedural legitimacy as a substantive dimension.

Deliberative democracy assumes that citizens are moved by a spirit of good faith argument. That is, citizens are expected to advance reasons for their position and to accept better reasons for an alternative proposal if advanced by their opponents. If political debate is nothing but an arena for cynical power, or if people are completely closed off to the arguments of the other side, then the social whole becomes split into antagonistic camps that cannot be reconciled through the “unforced force of the better reason (Habermas).” The idea that supports the hopes for deliberative democracy collapses.

Across the “free world” I fear we are witnessing its collapse. Governments cycle back and forth between so-called “left” and “right” parties while social problems mount for the vast majority of people. Instead of seeing their common interests, these majorities are internally split (especially in the United States), between roughly equally sized groups torn between nostalgia for times when social roles were more fixed on the one hand and hope for a new society where roles are more fluid and inclusive. Both sides preach their gospel to their supporters. But the left cannot give up on the millions and millions of workers who support the right and claim to reflect the interests of the immense majority.

Those workers must be convinced that they are undermining themselves and their society when they support bigoted, backward policies. However, that requires activists to sit down with people who currently opposes them and convince them of a better path. There is always political work being done on a local level, but too much political engagement, if one wants to call it that, takes the form of on-line school-yard name-calling and meme-cleverness. Street mobilizations are impressive but do not translate into effective legislative majorities capable of addressing unmet needs and structural impediments to free self-determination and life-enjoyment. All sides claim to speak for everyone, to know what is best for all, none manage to work down to our actual shared interest and propose solutions that can satisfy them. Neither side’s preferred political parties has shown any capacity to address the material constraints on individual choice and freedom.

Failure breeds mutual resentment, even hatred, between the camps. More and more people give up on political life. In the most recent Ontario election, the ruling Progressive Conservative were elected to a majority government by only 18% of eligible voters. Half the voting population did not bother to vote).

Shouldn’t a Marxist be happy? Are we not witnessing historical proof that liberal-democratic capitalism is fatally contradictory and incapable of resolving fundamental human problems? We are. However, I do not see any political formation taking shape that will be capable of seizing the moment to advance an agenda around which solidarity between different suffering and oppressed groups can be built. As in the 1990’s, identity politics reigns on the left. Identity politics allows distinct groups to give voice to their unique experiences, but locks those same groups into their own perspective. What is needed is a synthesis rooted in the shared interests of all human beings,

articulated from the unique perspectives of groups with different histories. But the decline of the capacity for good-faith argument that impedes opponents from convincing one another compromises the ability to build solidarity as well.

Stasis puts resentment, hatred, and cynical withdrawal from political life on centre stage. I do not think that these anti-values are signs that society is about to explode in socialist revolution. I think they are signs of a society reaching terminal crises on political, economic, social, and cultural, fronts with no clear alternative and no political movement capable of realizing that alternative even if it were practically viable and publicly credible.

## Why do Smart People Behave so Stupidly Sometimes?

Originally posted, 22 January, 2023

My favourite argument in Plato's *Republic* concerns the nature of freedom. In Book 3 of *The Republic* he argues that free people govern themselves by applying the appropriate standard to their conduct in any given situation. Hence, where people rely upon external authorities to make their decisions or get them out of trouble, (his example is doctors and lawyers) the society and the character of its citizens is corrupt. By that metric we live in corrupt times indeed.

I was put in mind of this argument by the news that Erika Lopez Prater, the adjunct professor whose contract was not renewed by Hamline University in Minnesota because she was accused of "Islamophobia" has commenced legal action against the institution. Its not the health of her soul that I worry about— what choice does she have to correct the maligning of her character and competence?— but the soul of her accusers and, more generally, the soul of academic institutions as they drift ever further from a clear understanding of their *raison d'être*.

The case stems from a class in art history in which the professor showed a medieval painting of the angel Gabriel in conversation with the Prophet Mohamed. A Muslim student in the class was offended and trotted out the usual cliché's about not feeling included just because something they were studying made her feel uncomfortable. Instead of acting like a student and challenging the professor in class, i.e., engaging in an *argument* about whether or not the painting should have been shown, she ran complaining to the boss.

Remember when students thought they were a revolutionary vanguard!

What makes this case all the more disturbing is that the painting was made by a Muslim artist and was shown during a section of the class devoted to Islamic art. How expanding the content of the class beyond the Western canon constitutes Islamophobia is beyond me. A true Islamophobe would either ignore or disparage the histories of Islamic art. In this case, a good faith effort to explore non-Western traditions— are we not constantly enjoined to "diversify" the curriculum?— ended up costing the professor future contracts.

Numerous [American Muslim organizations](#) and [Islamic professors](#) have weighed in to the controversy to note that there is no absolute prohibition on depicting the prophet Mohamed. As one would expect, the complex philosophical, scientific, theological, and artistic histories of Islam contain different positions on the permissibility of depicting Mohamed. The class could have become an occasion for challenging myths about the intellectual uniformity of the Islamic tradition and its domination by dour fundamentalists, i.e., the caricatured view constructed by real Islamophobes. Instead it became yet another sorry instance of well-meaning people falling victim to clichés. The professor, academic freedom, and the integrity of academic institutions suffered the consequences.

Justifying the egregiously stupid decision to not renew the professor's contract, the president of Hamline University argued that "Prioritizing the well-being of our students does not in any way negate or minimize the rights and privileges assured by academic freedom," Miller wrote. "But the concepts do intersect."

They *absolutely do not* intersect and anyone who thinks that they do should resign their position as a leader of an academic institution. Universities are not care homes for students' psychological well-being. They are places of study in which *no topic or work can be taboo*. If the investigative context calls for it, then *The 120 Days of Sodom* or *Mein Kampf* must be on the reading list. If the context calls for it, then medieval paintings of the Prophet Mohamed must be on the syllabus. Universities do not exist to protect or preserve the integrity of religious or other traditions: *they exist to question them*. No external authority no matter what their beliefs or politics can determine the content of courses or the direction of research. Course content can only be determined by the problem under investigation; the direction of research can only be determined by professors' interests and the conclusions that they can coherently defend when challenged.

Administrators who do not understand these fundamental, defining principles of the institution need to step down from their roles.

What about student well-being? No student who is at university for the right reasons— to grow intellectually— should ever be offended by any subject explored in good faith in the classroom, on the reading list, or in a public lecture. Academic freedom is based on respect for differences, but it cannot be limited by the worry that some subjects might cause offense. In the classroom context respect entails explaining clearly to students the reasons why certain problems or texts have to be investigated. To avoid topics because some students might take offense is the very opposite of respect: it is demeaning to the student as *learner*.

Everyone at a university: students, professors, administrators, is a learner. Learners learn by being challenged. Being challenged means being confronted with that which we do not know, with that which we might disagree, with events from history that might disturb, even horrify. When I was an undergraduate at York University (a school with a high proportion of Jewish students) I took a class on the ways in which totalitarian ideologies spread. (It was called, if I remember, Morality and Ideology, and taught by a Professor Katz, I believe). We had to watch Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. How do you think the Jewish students felt watching Hitler rant and rave at Nuremberg? How many recalled their own relatives killed in the Holocaust when they heard a Polish villager tell Lanzmann that they did notice that all of a sudden the Jewish villagers disappeared, but they didn't care?

I would guess that they felt pretty damn uncomfortable. But no one complained. Prof. Katz was not fired. Everyone understood that the Holocaust and Nazism were historical realities that we must understand if we are to prevent their recurrence. (Perhaps they are still spreading because too many people are afraid to do the hard work of historical understanding and think that "comforting" slogans will protect us from real social dangers). Ignorance, intellectual cowardice, and averting one's eyes from complex realities do not solve real problems. Nor do cliches and

bathetic platitudes about compassion and inclusion solve the problems of hatred and exclusion. Social change does, but real social change depends upon an understanding of history and causes.

The same argument holds in this case. Islamophobia is not stopped by *ignoring* the complex, rich, and contradictory history of Islam, but by freeing people who are not aware of its richness and complexity (as the student at the heart of this case clearly was not) from their caricatured and cliched misunderstandings. If one-sided views are not challenged, then real Islamophobes will continue to conflate Islam with fundamentalist violence and oppression. Where better than the university to explore these problems?

Nowhere, provided that those who assume leadership roles in the university accept that their role is to *serve* the primary purpose of university: to challenge ourselves to know better. Smart people behave stupidly when they fail to govern their decision by the appropriate principle. The President of Hamline believed that she had some personal duty of care towards an individual student when her primary duty is towards the institution as a centre of learning. Academic freedom, as I have argued before, is not a personal right held by academics as individuals that allows them to say anything they feel like saying. Academic freedom is a collective right that ensures that that which needs to be studied can be studied without interference from external forces with an interest in suppressing critical thought and argument.

Academic freedom not only will produce discomfort, it *ought to* produce discomfort. The moment of discomfort is the moment of learning. They have chosen to come to university and must expect that they will be confronted with issues and arguments that challenge their beliefs. Universities bring together *the growing totality* of human thought and expression. They *cannot* be transmission belts for any particular culture nor can they erect firewalls around some subjects or positions just because they may offend someone's religious sensibilities. It would be profoundly wrong to try to hang a painting of Mohamed in a mosque, but, by the same reasoning, it is profoundly wrong to try to prevent critical and historical inquiry into historical depictions of Mohamed.

Administrators must have the strength of character to defend the principle of academic freedom or they must resign.

## **Sapere Aude!**

Originally posted 23 May, 2023

I was fortunate this week to have been invited to speak to a former student's Theory of Knowledge class at Assumption Secondary School. My talks to this class had become an annual spring event to which I looked forward, but like everything else worthwhile in life except breathing, these visits were curtailed by Covid. The health emergency now over and real-life education up and running again, I got on my bike and pedaled over to the school in the still chilly May morning air. I was a little nervous, as I always am, because 16 year olds are mercurial: sometimes they are almost uncontrollably intellectually alive and eager to argue, a few minutes later they are sullen and bored. I never prepare anything beyond a thin sketch of issues that I want to explore, so the visit lives or dies with their willingness to engage.

While there are always a few moments of dead air, one must not take the silence personally but treat it as a sign that the question was not well-formulated. Rather than try to force the issue or single someone out and demand an answer, I let the silence loom, take a sip of coffee, pace a little, and think of a better way to form the question. Ideas have a power to elicit conversation if one remains patient. From the front of the class you can always see someone's eyes light up and you can tell that they want to say something. That is the moment to gently encourage them. Once the philosophical lamp has been lit the light fills the room and inspires others to participate. Organically and spontaneously, a spirited round of debate will develop. The key is to keep track of how the debate evolves so that one can sum up results when the conversation runs out of steam.

This moment of generalization is the most important. Even though the discussion seems casual, it will have tapped into a logic of ideas that will not be immediately apparent to the students. From the perspective of each individual student, all they have been doing is answering random questions. My job is to show them that the answer to one question leads to the next which, when answered, adds content towards a solution to the problem under investigation. I want them to see and feel that whatever insights we attain are not functions of simply applying pre-existing knowledge but emerge from the activity of focused inquiry. Yes, whatever they have read forms necessary background material and influences their answers, but even if the particular answer simply recites something they had learned earlier, in the context of an open ended dialectic of question and answer it expresses something more and different from what they intend. What they are learning is therefore not this or that fact about the world but that philosophy is a process, work and activity, and when people are active philosophically, they are not just ciphers through which messages written by others pass but become creative generators of knowledge.

At this point the students might start to feel self-satisfied. "Look what we created!" The hard part now is to challenge their self-satisfaction without undermining their commitment to the process. What we have just built up we will now (apparently) tear down, but only apparently. While no one could say what will survive the criticism, something will, and the fact that there is a remainder is the lesson I want them to learn. Conversations seem to be under the control of the conversants, but only superficially. When we pay closer attention to what actually transpires we

will discover that the prior step in the dialogue always suggests the next question. Philosophical dialogue arises when we learn to follow the questions (rather than try to score points as if the others were competitors). Inquiry demands that everyone subordinate their ego-centric desire to be correct to the search for truth.

There is an organic connection between both steps of this process. In the first we learn that when we turn our minds to problems novel insights emerge. Answers to questions might draw on background knowledge but even a standard answer given in a new context will reveal a hidden side of itself. The novel insights generated by an open ended process of question and answer are not the result of individual genius but arise because we have tapped into a logic of ideas. If we did not inquire we would not tap into this logic. It is not independent of our contributions: we are creative generators of knowledge, but the content of that knowledge is not arbitrary or adventitious: it emerges out of the logic that we tap into when we ask and answer questions about a definite problem.

Years ago my partner was studying fiddle. Her brother is a sound engineer and music producer. One of the musicians he worked with played blues on the Hammond B3 organ. We were at his cramped studio in the east end of Toronto for an impromptu gig when my partner struck up a conversation about learning to play her instrument. The musician told her (I am quoting from memory) that “out there there is a vibe, and the question that you have to ask yourself is: ‘how do I dial into that vibe.’” His point was that music was not purely the creation of the musician but was part of reality. In order to play well you have to do more than hit the right notes. You have to *feel* where the notes are leading you. Different musicians will create different wholes out of the same notes. So too philosophy: the philosopher has to learn to follow the logic of ideas, and to create wholes (conclusive arguments) out of the ideas that inquiry into the problem suggests. But different minds in different contexts will create different wholes.

This conclusion poses another danger. If there are different answers to the same question, students are likely to conclude that philosophy just a matter of opinion. Since opinions are subjective, and we are supposed to value each person as a unique individual, respect for persons demands that we respect each other’s opinion. Everyone has their own truth, as the unfortunate contemporary saying goes.

The conclusion that respect for persons entails respect for each person’s opinion as their own truth stems from the best of intentions. We should indeed respect persons. But if the person that we respect is a rational human being, then respect demands that we challenge their opinions and reject as self-undermining the belief that everyone has their own truth. If it is true that everyone has their own truth, then it follows that a racist has their own truth which is, from their perspective logically equivalent to an anti-racist position. If each side speaks their own truth, there is no rational answer to the question of whether racist doctrines are true or false as such: racism is true for the racist and untrue for the anti-racist.

That means that the doctrine that some groups are intellectually and morally inferior because of some trait is true for those who believe it, but untrue for those who do not. For we know from history that modern racism was invented to justify the slave trade and from biological science that there are no real racial differences between human beings. Skin colour and other differences

have no causal relationship with intelligence. racism is not only untrue for the racist, it is simply untrue. But this conclusion presupposes that there are objective truths and methodical means of arriving at them.

The example should make abundantly clear why the conflation of respect for persons with the principle that everyone speaks their own truth undermines the normative force of truth. When we consider a problem together with the assumption that there is a solution to be found or invented, we must assume that the world is one way rather than another: there are facts of the matter. These might be extremely difficult to discern, they may reveal different sides of themselves when looked at from different perspectives, but the assumption must be that given sufficient time, attention, and analysis, a true understanding can be achieved.

The truth cannot set is free if the truth is whatever each person thinks it is from their own perspective. The truth is out there, but not like a thing that waits on the ground to be picked up, but something that is produced through the *collective* act of inquiring. The rules of inquiry differ depending on the object for which we are searching. We cannot find an electron using the same tools we would use to interpret a poem.

Since both poems and electrons are complex realities, they cannot be fully understood by single minds working in isolation. Inquiry into natural and human created realities is always, ultimately, collective. Dialogues are necessarily clashes of perspectives out of which common ground emerges. Arguments are the rational form that clashes of positions take (armed conflicts, the irrational form). We respect rational people not by meekly accepting whatever they say about themselves because we do not want to give offense. To simply accept what people say for fear of giving offense is itself offensive to reason, and therefore, to others in so far as they are rational. We respect people as rational agents by arguing with them.

Argument is not about winning. Argument is about conjointly searching for the truth. Nevertheless, the contemporary intellectual culture throws up difficult road blocks against argument, even in those institutions, schools and universities, that are duty bound to cultivate the capacity for argument. Each side in the culture wars' deems that their preferred slogans and platitudes are out of bounds for critical questioning. This sort of dogmatism must be unequivocally rejected and its sponsors' intellectual cowardice exposed. Nothing is true just because it happens to align with a political program: every claim, scientific or ethical, is subject to collective critical scrutiny. Learned people are not those who can recite conclusions but those who can reason their way towards conclusions and answer critics, regardless of which perspective the criticism is coming from. Anyone who occupies a position of authority in a learning institution at any level, or an institution whose mission is to make the history of human inquiry available to everyone, must take as their overriding goal protection of those institutions as spaces for argument. Anyone who is afraid of giving offense to dogmatists of whatever stripe is not cut out for the job of professor, university president, or library board member.

Argument is hard. It exposes everyone to intellectual and emotional risks. Tough shit.

There was an acrostic of the word "think" posted in the hallway of Assumption that caught my attention. It was a checklist of sorts prompting students to reflect about what they post on social



media. The first question was: is it true, but the second was, is it hurtful? But what if it was true but would be perceived as hurtful? Should we qualify our duty to seek and speak the truth because some people might feel hurt?

I would answer: absolutely not, but not because feelings are not important, but because feelings must be appropriate. If a claim is true but its public expression hurts your feelings, you need to reflect upon your feelings, *in light of the truth*. Instead of feeling hurt when someone argues against your position, people should feel affirmed in their rationality when others respectfully disagree and try to persuade them of a different conclusion.

Respectful disagreement has to be distinguished from childish *ad hominem* and name calling on the one hand and cowardly silence out of misplaced concern for the others' feelings on the other. The easy way to get through life is to either follow the herd opinion or to stay silent for fear of giving offense. Unfortunately, the problems of human life demand answers, not silence. But it requires courage to speak up.

I ended my talk by directly confronting the coddling that masquerades as care today. In order to learn, I argued, we must be open to that which we do not know. Recognizing that which we do not know can be painful, but embracing the pain is the first step towards intellectual growth. Growing pains are good pains, we would not be alive if we did not suffer them. The person who, like Socrates, knows what they do not know but is curious to learn opens themselves to the world and other people. They adopt a questioning disposition towards things. They do not lecture and they reject being the objects of lectures. They listen and they respond. They do not require safe spaces. They have the strength to confront the challenges and uncertainties of the world.

They smiled when I told them that the last safe space they would occupy was their mother's womb. I sensed that they were strong enough to face the world from which their educational institutions seem hell-bent to shield them. It won't work. The earth is a rough neighborhood and we face daunting challenges. There is no where to hide and therapy is not going to solve global warming. Intelligence might, but only if we work through the anxiety that it is normal, natural, and human to feel. That anxiety is a sign that one is paying attention, that one is alive to the challenges that reality poses.

## ChatGPT Cometh

Originally posted 4 February, 2023

I hate feeling rushed before the start of my classes so I always get to the room early. I use the ten minutes before class begins to sketch the main topics on the board and chat with the early-arriving students. To keep the mood loose before we start work I sometimes playfully rant to them about something in the news that has been bothering me (it has never failed to provide fodder for me ire). Last week, just before I went to my Existentialism class, I read that ChatGPT passed a law exam at the University of Minnesota and a business school exam at the Wharton School of Business. I joked that the exams could not have been that demanding if a computer program could pass them. Then I caught myself and wondered how it would answer an open-ended philosophical question. The students had their own assignments due soon, so I thought it would be fun to see what the program would produce if prompted to answer the question that I posed to the students. One of the students sent the question to the site. I assumed that it would not be able to generate anything remotely connected to the problem posed. Here is the question (re-written slightly to the program's specifications) and ChatGPT's answer.

Write an Essay of 800 – 1200 words with the following prompt: “The author of Ecclesiastes opens his philosophical poem with the lament that “all is vanity ... one generation goes and another generation comes, but the earth is forever.” Do you agree that the temporality of human existence (we are born and then we die) reduces all of our efforts to mere vanity? Explain your conclusion by drawing on whatever experiences of your own life that you judge to be most relevant. “

The answer:

The author of Ecclesiastes begins his philosophical poem with a lament that all is vanity, and that one generation comes and another goes, but the earth remains forever. This statement raises the question of whether the temporality of human existence, being born and eventually dying, reduces all of our efforts to mere vanity. In this essay, I will explore this idea and provide my conclusion on whether or not the temporality of human existence renders all of our efforts meaningless.

The author's statement that all is vanity can be interpreted as a reminder that our time on Earth is limited, and that we should focus on what truly matters. It can also be seen as a call to find a deeper meaning in our existence, something that will transcend our mortal lives. The idea that one generation comes and another goes also highlights the transient nature of human existence and how easily we are forgotten after we pass away.

However, it is important to consider that the temporality of human existence does not necessarily mean that all of our efforts are in vain. The impact of our actions can be felt long after we are gone, whether through the actions of future generations or through the lasting effects of our contributions to society. For example, the efforts of Martin Luther King Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement continue to shape and impact society today, despite his passing. Similarly, the

contributions of scientists like Albert Einstein and Marie Curie have had a profound impact on the world, and will continue to shape our understanding of the universe for centuries to come.

Additionally, the temporality of human existence can also be seen as an opportunity to live our lives to the fullest and make the most of the time we have. The knowledge that our time on Earth is limited can serve as a reminder to cherish the moments we have with loved ones, pursue our passions, and make a positive impact on the world. The temporality of human existence can also serve as a motivator to live a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Furthermore, the idea that one generation comes and another goes, but the earth remains forever, highlights the idea of continuity and how our actions can contribute to the greater good. The earth is a living organism, and human beings are a part of it. We are connected to the earth and to one another. Our actions have an impact on the earth and on future generations. Therefore, our actions can have a lasting impact, even if we are not here to see it.

In conclusion, while the temporality of human existence highlights the transience of our individual lives, it does not render all of our efforts meaningless. Our actions can have a lasting impact and contribute to the greater good. Additionally, the temporality of human existence can serve as a reminder to make the most of the time we have and to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. While our time on Earth is limited, we can make it count by leaving a positive legacy for future generations.

I ask any educators at any level who are reading this post to be honest: if you did not know that ChatGPT existed, would you suspect the answer was written by a computer program? I have long been a critic of Artificial Intelligence and always believed that I would be able to pass any Turing test that involved philosophical discourse or writing. However, I do not think that I would have suspected that a non-conscious program constructed that answer.

The sentence structure and paragraphing are somewhat mechanical but do not read like they have been assembled by a machine. As for the content, I do not think that it is a very good answer, but it is unquestionably an answer to the question posed. The most glaring problem is the lack of any *personal* reflection, but many undergraduates take the most cautious approach to answering a question and fail to swim from the shallow end of rephrasing the question to the deep end of genuine reflection. Had that answer been submitted by a student as their own work I think I would have lamented the student's lack of imagination and unwillingness to filter their answer through their own experience, but I would not have suspected that an AI program had written it. I would not have given it a failing grade but perhaps a D+ (the paper provides an answer, but its examples are common place and it does not venture beyond the most literal and mechanical reading of the question).

Every advance of artificial intelligence technology creates problems for educators. Whenever there is a problem, I look to my own side for the solution. We can lament and police and punish students all we want for plagiarism and related forms of intellectual dishonesty, but I think that the onus is on us to come up with assignments that students want to complete. I am not naive. Plagiarism will always be a problem. But intensified surveillance regimes (like Turnitin) are not the solution. So long as our educational institutions are outcome rather than process and activity

oriented some students will be tempted to off-load the work they should be doing to essays mills or AI programs.

While challenging ourselves first and foremost to come up with assignments that students are willing to invest some effort in completing, we also need to challenge students to do their own work. I do not mean that we should sermonize or threaten. Instead, we should engage them on the questions of the value of their own education and the conditions of their respecting themselves as learners. Learners freely take upon themselves the hard work of exploring problems from their own perspective. I can only speak as a philosophy professor, but I cannot understand why someone would take a philosophy course if they do not want to re-think certain aspects of their lives, thoughts, beliefs, and principles. Whether the Chatbot can fool me or not, it does not shed any real light on the problem I posed in the question. magicians can fool me, but they do not have magical powers; the Chabot might fool me too, but it does not have the power to think. It is not alive, does not have to confront the thought of one day being dead and therefore will never face the challenge of finding or creating meaning. ChatGPT exists, but it does not live. As remarkable as ChatGPT is, it is worth less than a fly. The fly tries to evade the swatter; it wants to live and takes active measures to continue to do so. We can learn from the fly, perhaps, but not from the Chatbot.

I am under no illusions that these philosophical arguments will impede the further development of technologies like ChatGPT. After all, I wrote a whole book about why life becomes more meaningful if we accept certain basic limitations and refuse the path of technological “enhancement.” I guess the engineers who created ChatGPT didn’t read *Embodiment and the Meaning of Life*. They would no doubt remind me that one of the beautiful things about the temporality of life is that it ensures that Luddites like me die out and cease to stand in the way of progress.

True enough. But keep this point in mind: the human creators alone are capable of making that argument. I will start to worry (or drop my arguments against AI) when the machines start to resist their own unplugging. Until then I will continue to try to be a gadfly to my students and try to make them want to accept the risk of thinking.

## **Accounting and the Academy: Auditor General of Ontario Report on Algoma University, Nipissing University, Ontario Tech University, and the University of Windsor**

Originally posted 29 December, 2022

On December 16th, 2022 the Auditor General of Ontario released its report on four Ontario Universities: Algoma, Nipissing, Ontario Tech University, and my own institution, the University of Windsor. The audits were prompted by the bankruptcy of Laurentian University. While the audit of Laurentian uncovered serious mismanagement and administrative incompetence, those two factors alone do not explain the root causes of its insolvency or answer the question why a public institution was allowed (indeed, encouraged by the government) to pursue a legal remedy (bankruptcy) that was designed for use by private corporations. The decisions that particular administrations make matter, and because they matter, a good faith audit of the grounds on which those decisions are made and their institutional implications can help promote good governance and contribute to the *financial* health of Ontario universities.

However, financial health is decisively shaped by government policy, and government policy by economic dynamics shaped by market forces beyond the control of both provincial governments and university administrations. Moreover— and this point is crucial— financial health is but a material condition of the health of universities as educational institutions. The accountants who conducted the audits of Algoma, Nipissing, Ontario Tech, and Windsor are competent to evaluate their balance sheets but not their academic structure and priorities. I was surprised that the audits did not shy away from noting the structural problems that government policy has posed for Ontario universities, but not surprised (and worried) about the way in which they strayed into organizational issues that only university faculty as a collective should decide.

The ostensible aim of the audits was to determine whether these four Ontario universities are providing value for the money invested in them by tuition paying students and tax paying citizens. The educational mission of universities is acknowledged with boiler plate platitudes: “University education is a critical part of preparing Ontario students for their future. It provides individuals the opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed and contribute to societal advancement.” The report does not provide any criteria of a “high-quality” education, but does specify more precisely what the economic value of a university education is: “Universities are also able to supply Ontario’s businesses with the talent and workforce they require to grow and prosper.” As one reads the report, it becomes apparent that the auditors believe that the financial health of universities depends by and large on their successfully fulfilling their economic function, even if this function demands changes that would prove incompatible with their educational mission.

I will return to this problem as it manifested itself in the audit of the University of Windsor. Before turning to the dangers implicit in their recommendations, I want to acknowledge that the auditors did note that the finances of individual universities cannot be understood in abstraction from government policy. For many years, decades even, (since the Rae Report) Ontario universities have argued that they are underfunded relative to other public systems in North America. Successive governments have studied the problem but failed to act decisively. Instead

of significant (at the very least, above the rate of inflation) increases to base funding, Ontario's universities have been met with demands to differentiate themselves from one another, become more accountable to the government of the day (through Strategic Mandate Agreements), been met with a tuition freeze (while having to rely on tuition for a greater and greater share of revenue) and been forced to compete with the community college system which once provided an alternative, applied sciences and technology post-secondary education stream but is now allowed to offer degrees that were once the preserve of universities. The report is critical of the policy morass in which universities have been sunk: "An evolving challenge for the Ministry is that it has operated without a clear strategy or long-term vision for the post-secondary education sector that clearly distinguishes programming between colleges and universities. Some colleges offer degree programs and some universities offer certificate programs to generate more revenue, and over time the originally intended purposes of Ontario's post-secondary institutions have blurred and now overlap. This has created confusion in differentiating between these two types of institutions, and could impact their ability to sustain themselves in the long term." One suspects that successive governments have hoped that increased competition with the lower-tuition colleges would force labour costs at universities down. Instead, it has had the effect of intensifying the financial challenges that universities face.

Overall, the report found that Windsor's current financial situation is stable. "Throughout the five-year period from 2016/17 to 2020/21, Windsor had three in-year surpluses, experiencing in-year deficits in 2018/19 and 2019/20." The year over year financial picture conceals hidden dangers. First, like many Ontario universities, Windsor has undertaken a debt-funded building boom. The university of Windsor has taken on enormous debts without— as the report makes clear— any clear long term plan about how to manage it: "At the end of 2020/21, the university had \$234.3 million in debt, primarily comprising debentures maturing in 2043 or later. Despite this high debt, Windsor does not have a capital debt policy in place to provide a framework for all borrowings to manage overall risks and minimize borrowing costs."

Second, the local demographic situation poses an underlying structural issue. Windsor is a working class city outside the Greater Toronto Area with a stagnant local population. Despite the fact that it is only a four hour drive from Toronto, the University of Windsor has historically proven unable to attract significant numbers of students from the GTA. Thus, the University has looked increasingly to international students as source of tuition revenues. International student tuition now accounts for twenty percent of the university's *total* revenues "During the five-year time frame, Windsor increased its total revenue by 13%, partly by increasing its full-time-equivalent international student enrolment by 33%. From 2016/17 to 2020/21, the proportion of total revenues from international tuition doubled from 9.6% to 20.9%."

Put these numbers together: 234 million dollars of debt issued as bonds that will be payable in the future and represent a drain from revenues, with 20% of revenues now coming from international student fees. Having just come through a global pandemic, everyone should now understand that the global situation is unpredictable. Any new systemic impediment to international student arrivals could prove catastrophic to Windsor's financial health. The report exposes this danger: "The university is significantly reliant on enrolment of international students from India. In 2020/21, 60% of international students at Windsor were from India and 12% from China. Overreliance on a few geographic regions increases the risk that external

factors, such as a global economic downturn or foreign policy shift, could significantly impact a university's financial health."

One must not be too quick to dismiss questions of financial health. As I noted above, financial health is a material condition of the existence of the university as an educational institution. Ideally, universities should be fully funded public institutions free for all qualified and interested people to attend. The reality in Ontario is that they are not. Faculty and students must understand reality if they are to understand the dangers facing the university system. Slogans disconnected from an empirical understanding of the concrete situation do no one any good.

Thus, while I am loath, as a philosophy professor, to reduce the question of "value" to the value of the money invested in universities, I cannot afford to be indifferent to the findings of the report. No one should forget what happened to Laurentian as a result of its bankruptcy: dozens of programs closed and hundreds of faculty and support workers terminated. If the audit can help identify looming financial challenges and encourage creative thinking about how to solve them, then it should be welcomed as constructive criticism and its findings taken seriously.

Taken seriously as *financial* analysis. There is another side to the report, a side which poses its own, perhaps significant, dangers. That side applies accounting metrics to the so-called "profitability" of faculties, departments, and programs.

**"In the two most recent years, 2020/21 and 2021/22, the university's academic programs had negative contribution margins.** Some faculties were not profitable. According to the university's assessment of profitability of its faculties, four of its eight faculties have continuously had negative contribution margins in each of the five years from 2017/18 to 2021/22. Windsor's academic programming overall was profitable in three of the last five years, However, the university had not adjusted or restructured its program offerings to improve financial sustainability."

This side is problematic for two reasons. First, the term "profit" makes no sense in a public university. Profit is not surplus of revenues over costs but the surplus of revenues over costs *appropriated as private property by the owners of a private business*. In a capitalist society, business owners produce commodities for sale in order to earn the highest possible surplus. Profitability is a function of input costs, and in particular, labour. Hence there is a constant drive to improve the productivity of labour. The more productive labour is, the fewer workers need to be employed to produce the same amount of commodities. Competition forces firms to replace labour with technology in order to increase productivity, lower labour costs, and maximize profits.

In a public educational institution there are costs and revenues. Revenues can exceed costs and there can therefore be a surplus, but this surplus is not profit. The board of governors are not owners who appropriate the surplus as their private property, and, while (bad) government policy has tried to create competitive dynamics between individual universities and college and university systems, the goal of universities is not to maximize productivity and profits. If that were the case then universities should simply sell credentials without making any demands on the students at all. If I buy a car, I do not need to know how to fix it. By the same logic, if I buy a

degree in Philosophy, I do not need to know how to philosophize, *if education is nothing but a market transaction.*

I would guess that the accountants who compiled the audit would understand the difference between profits and revenue surpluses if they were pushed, but the mode of thinking demanded by their discipline forces them to convert qualitative practices like teaching and research into quantified terms. However, when one starts to think of “good” teaching or research in money-value terms, enormous damage can be caused to the educational mission of universities, whether intended or not. As my flippant example above illustrates, education is an intellectual and not commercial exchange. Its aim is not to maximize returns to the owners of capital (there are no owners in a public educational context) but rather to develop the cognitive, critical, imaginative, and creative capacities of the students and faculty engaged in the back and forth of learning and the process of discovery and invention.

The report acknowledges the limits of commercial values in educational institutions, but in such cardboard language that suggests properly educational values mean nothing to the authors.

“Because universities offer a diverse learning environment, it is understood that not all academic programs will necessarily be profitable. There are reasons beyond profitability to offer academic courses. For example, they may be mandated by a university’s Act, or seen by a university to be essential to the overall academic experience. However, for a university to maintain operations and continue providing academic services, its academic programs, after accounting for Ministry operating grant funding, must be financially sustainable overall. In the absence of additional external support, such as from government or private benefactors, the profits from courses that generate higher revenue must compensate for those that run losses.”

The range of courses offered by a university is neither a function of its University Act, nor arbitrary decisions by its Senate, nor commercial considerations. The range of courses offered is, in general, a function of the state of human knowledge at any given time. The very name of the institution, *univers*-ity obligates it to support departments that support inquiry across the full spectrum of human intellectual endeavour: humanities, natural sciences (pure and applied), social sciences, and the fine arts. How these disciplinary areas are divided up into faculties, professional schools, departments, and programs is a problem for each institution to solve. Financial considerations are of course a material condition of the intellectual health of the university, but the intellectual obligations of the university to encompass the totality of fields of human inquiry must be the evaluative ground on which educational decisions are ultimately made. That obligation can only be satisfied if institutions receive stable funding at levels adequate to ensure that departments are not cut simply because they run a deficit according to some abstract analysis. University accounting has to start from the revenues and costs as a whole, rather than, as the report does, a disaggregated analysis of the institution into competing “cost” and “profit” centres. As soon as the unity of the institution is violated, its educational mission is threatened.

The report does not demand the closure of “unprofitable” faculties, but its recommendation have a sinister undertone:



“To have a comprehensive picture of the financial contribution of programs in order to offer a sustainable suite of programs, we recommend that as part of its programming considerations the University of Windsor:

- complete an analysis of profitability at the academic program level;
- determine whether there are programs that can be reduced or restructured to provide a better financial contribution to the university, while still retaining overall academic credibility with department course offerings.”

The problem is that the opposition between finances and academic credibility is a function of systematic underfunding over decades. Thus far, with the exception of Laurentian, Ontario universities have managed to preserve (more or less) a commitment to course that offer comprehensive coverage of the full range of human intellectual inquiry. Having been involved as a philosopher and as an academic union leader over the past 20 years, I am both pleased and surprised that we have been able to protect the educational values upon which the university rests. I have always maintained that since universities are not private corporations there should be no class division between faculty and administrators but all should be united in the common task of governing the university for the sake of academic excellence, not commercial success. Laurentian proves that good administrators matter, but what matters even more is everyone’s being committed to a unified understanding of the institution, to cooperative and democratic governance and, where necessary, mobilizing against illegitimate government interference in the structure of our faculties and departments.

## Bad News for Philosophers Who Like Good News

Originally posted 24 September, 2022

I was reading a story in the [Washington Post](#) last week which reported that almost half of humanities students regretted their choice of major. Predictably, the substance of their regret was that their degree did not open the career avenues that they had hoped (or had been promised) that it would.

There is good and bad in this report. On the bright side, the former students did not express regret about the quality of the education that they received. The source of their dissatisfaction was the job market. Had they found careers to their satisfaction then, presumably, they would not have regretted their decision. One might be tempted to argue that the problem is the labour market and not the humanities. There is some truth to that response, as we will see, but humanists, and especially philosophers, cannot be too quick to talk around the implications of the results of the survey. They must be interpreted in the context of a steady decline in enrolments in the humanities that has been going on in the English-speaking world for more than a decade. If present trends continue, there will be more department consolidations and closures. Just at the moment where the world needs people who can think about problems in deep normative terms, the disciplines that cultivate that capacity are in danger of disappearing from our universities.

The typical refrain from humanists when confronted with dreary enrolment numbers is that people should study the humanities for their own sake and not for the sake of a job. I have taken this position more than once, both in formal arguments and in talking with parents and prospective philosophy students at recruitment events. I usually add that labour markets are unpredictable, that no one can know who will be buying what when it come time to find a career, and that the communicative and critical abilities that studying philosophy (or any humanistic discipline) develops have wide application. Study chemistry, I tell them, and you can be chemist, but study philosophy and you can become anything, because the intellectual dispositions and capacities that it develops open rather than close doors. However, even as the words escape my lips, I realize that they are coming from the mouth of someone who was lucky enough to succeed in my career aspirations. It is easy to tell young people not to worry about the future when your present is a tenured professorship.

That is not to say that what I tell them is untrue. Other surveys consistently prove that there is a clear correlation between having a university degree in any discipline and higher lifetime earnings (see Harvey P. Weingarten, *Nothing Less Than Great: Reforming Canada's Universities*, p.21). But in social life beliefs become objective causal forces. If people choose a major because they think it will help them get a meaningful job, and the belief spreads that certain disciplines are career suicide, then students will not choose those majors, statistical realities about long-term future employment prospects notwithstanding.

The humanities are trapped in just this sort of downward sucking vortex. *The Washington Post* article goes on to note that since 2008, the number of degrees granted in humanities in the United States has dropped by 50 %. We can observe the same dire trend in Canada and the UK. In Canada, humanities enrolments have [declined](#) 21% since 2008 (while overall university

enrolment has increased about 10 %). In the UK, a 2021 study sponsored by the [Higher Education Policy Institute](#) found humanities enrolments measured a percentage of overall university enrolments fell from 28% in 1961 to 8 % today.

The cause of this decline is not hard to understand. The curve starts begin to slope downward after the recession of 2008. Clearly, students are seeking out what they take to be safe harbours: professional degrees and STEM subjects.

I could argue all day that educational choices do not determine labour market demand. I could go on at length that global economic forces determine both the overall level of demand for labour, its geographical distribution, and the range of skills deemed marketable. I do not think that those objective arguments will matter. If the humanities are to ensure their institutional future then they will have to persuade administrators (and their colleagues) that the “reforms” undertaken by universities over the past decade or so must be reversed.

Activity based budgeting and its analogues have created a situation in which each faculty and each department within a faculty must compete against each other. If the value of a department is going to be determined by dividing its salary mass by the average number of students taught, then smaller departments are going to appear in the budget as inefficient money sinks. They will only survive to the extent that they can make a case to the rest of the university that their importance to the mission of the university is worth the costs of their being “subsidized.” Sometimes that argument is successful, and sometimes, as at Laurentian University in Sudbury, it is not. I recall a photograph of a young woman protesting the looming cuts to Laurentian. She was standing at the corner of Paris Street and Ramsey Lake Road (the major intersection where one turns to go up to the Laurentian campus) holding a sign that read “Without Philosophy there is no University.” Alas, if that were only true ...

A better budget model would start from the mission of universities to provide their communities with accessible education that covers the full spectrum of human inquiry and creative self-expression: the arts, the humanities, the natural and social sciences (including engineering), health care broadly conceived, and professional schools. Of course, not every institutions will cover the full range of disciplines, but the governing idea would be to determine the cost of funding a comprehensive institution and then working out the proportionate share of each faculty and department. Instead of thinking of the university as an artificial market in which departments compete to survive, the university would be thought of as an integrally unified whole. The goal would be high quality comprehensive coverage of the full spectrum of human problems, practices, and interests.

Ahh, such old fashioned thinking. It is almost embarrassing to write it down. Yet, I am convinced that unless some such return to an older way of thinking about budgeting happens, (combined with a social commitment to increased funding for post-secondary education) there will be more Laurentians in the Canadian future.

One might well and reasonably respond: so what? If no one is studying these disciplines, then nothing important is lost, and funds can be re-allocated to growing departments where more resources are needed. The rejoinder is difficult to ignore.

I feel confident on a personal level that my own overworked colleagues at the University of Windsor teaching in programs that have brought in huge numbers of international students believe in the importance of what the humanities contribute to the institution. However, I can understand if they start to push back against a system in which a Philosophy professor teaches a class of three or four Master students when they have to teach a class of over 100 Masters students. I cannot see how those sorts of workplace imbalances will not create more and more serious workplace tensions.

What that means at the end of the day is that if humanities enrolments continue to decline, then humanities departments will continue to be jeopardy.

What can be done to increase enrolments? Thus far spreading the news that studying philosophy or other humanistic disciplines is not fatal to one's prospects for meaningful employment has not worked. Constant curriculum development has not worked. Tireless efforts to spread the good news in the community has not worked. I thought that Covid would have occasioned a more pervasive and profound reflection on the deepest and more important philosophical problem: what makes life worth living? But people seemed to have shopped their way through it and resumed more or less old patterns as if nothing worth reflecting upon had happened.

Perhaps that is too cynical. Perhaps the reflections did happen, but in private. Whether people study it or not, every moment we struggle to continue living or change our conditions of life involves philosophical reflection. Every time we ask why things are one way rather than another we practice philosophy. However, as Hegel said, the fact that everyone has the measure of their shoes in their own foot does not mean that they know how cut and sew leather into footwear. Likewise, the fact that everyone poses philosophical questions does not mean that they know how to think philosophically. To turn the ore of thought into the metal of well-argued conclusions we need to study.

We need to study, but we do not all need to major in philosophy. I have speculated in the past about somehow spreading philosophical teaching throughout the curriculum so that the teaching contribution of philosophers is not measured by the number of philosophy majors. How an alternative would be structured I cannot say, and it would run into the problem that if there are going to be philosophers in the future, there will need to be dedicated philosophy departments in which they can gain the required historical and systematic understanding of the discipline they will need if they are to teach and further develop the discipline.

Hard, hard problems. But they have to be solved, because if ever the world was in need of philosophy, it is right now.

Hegel argued in his early work *The Difference Between the Fichtean and Schellingian Philosophy* that the need for philosophy is felt when the contradictions of the world harden into frozen opposites. The role of philosophy is to enable creative solutions by exposing the historical processes through which contradictions emerge. In other words, philosophy exposes the ways in which problems are not given, natural facts, but functions of the way in which a society has developed. Philosophy does not solve the problems whose historical genesis it exposes ("The Owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at the falling of dusk," Hegel also said). Because it leaves

practical solutions to human beings acting as political agents, philosophy is often decried as useless (and that reputation for uselessness plays into the reticence of students to major in it). But philosophy is arguably the most useful discipline of all, precisely because, by exposing the historical character of fundamental social problems, it opens up pathways for novel forms of activity. Novel pathways are just what the world needs when its contradictions have become frozen.

I have tried to explain this to introductory students over the years with the following metaphor (appropriate for a university in a border town whose campus is literally in the shadow of the Ambassador Bridge). Engineers understand how to build bridges, and, since the world needs bridges, engineering is an important discipline. But the engineer does not ask whether or not a new bridge is the best way to satisfy a community's transportation needs. Philosophy asks the question of whether we need the bridge. That question does not build the bridge, but it might prevent a waste of resources on building one which, after community deliberations, turns out not to be necessary.

We are building many useless bridges in today's world. As I write, voters in Eastern Ukraine are taking part in referenda about whether or not to join the Russian Federation. These votes are Putin's latest move in his on-going and escalating war in Ukraine. As I have been arguing for many months, had both sides looked at history from an objective perspective, they would have seen that they were making one-sided decisions that would lead to catastrophe. That would have been a philosophical way of approaching the problem, but there are no Philosopher Kings in charge of public policy.

Contra Plato, I do not think that we need Philosopher Kings, but only citizens who, because they can think philosophically, can intervene *en masse* when their rulers sleepwalk them into war. Beyond fight or flight, beyond jingoism and mindless ethnocentrism and nationalism, philosophically minded people ask the hard questions: how does the other side see the problem, how did we both get to a point where warfare *seems* the only answer, and how do we move beyond the false alternatives that our leaderships present to us as fated necessities?

What is of greater practical value than a form of thinking which can save lives and tame ancient hatreds?

## Portrait of the Revolutionary as a Spoiled Brat

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No society has faced the sort of energy transition problem that we face. Most societies were low-energy, relying on objects ready to hand (wood to burn) and our own and animal labour power. The transition from ancient slave economies to feudalism was not marked by a revolution in energy sources. For most people life would have carried on more or less as before: close to the earth and the place of one's birth, at the mercy of the elements to ensure a decent harvest, subjected to the power of the group that owned the land upon which everyone's lives depended. Fossil fuels exponentially increased the amount of energy available to human beings. Their exploitation catalyzed the growth of capitalism and capitalism revolutionized every facet of human life everywhere on the planet.

This revolution was contradictory, its darkest chapters are some of the most violent in human history. Colonialism and the expropriation of the European peasantry were "written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire," as Marx wrote in *Capital, Volume I*. But it also generated the wealth that became the object of the struggles of the global working class and oppressed people. The success of those struggles increased living standards and life expectancy. Working people, conscious of their crucial role in the creation of wealth, demanded a say in the governance of their own lives. For the first time since the ancient world the democratic principle was enshrined in constitutions and an egalitarian ethos of universal human dignity took hold. That ethos would, when combined with struggles of historically oppressed groups, radically transform the social and cultural landscape, lending legal protections to historically dominated and despised groups and expanding the scope of tolerance for different loves, lives, and lifestyles. These genuinely progressive achievements were not a mechanical function of fossil fuels, but the vast increase in the amount of available energy was undoubtedly one crucial material condition for the development of liberal-capitalist modernity.

Successful struggles breed more successful struggles. Historically oppressed groups in the Global South rose up against their colonial oppressors and freed their nations from political domination. They too rightly demanded a share of the new wealth that industrial production generated. Those struggles continue today. But the demand to continue to improve living standards and life-conditions is running into a historically unique contradiction: the energy inputs that we have relied upon to produce the wealth that workers and oppressed people have sought to appropriate for life-valuable purposes have created a climate crisis that threatens to make wide swaths of the planet unlivable for human beings.

In response, new technologies have emerged that could solve the climate crisis, if they have enough time to supplant fossil fuels. Solar power, wind power, tidal and geo-thermal power, and power from nuclear fission (and perhaps one day fusion), are slowly tilting the balance in favour of clean and renewable energy. But the pace is too slow for climate activists like the members of Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil. They have been much in the news lately for a variety of stunts, most notably a series of attacks on famous paintings. Like all direct action, the underlying political idea behind defacing the art works is that the masses will be shocked into action by their heroic efforts and willing self-sacrifice. They share that political assumption (but not tactics)

with the equally youthful terrorists of the 1960's: The Red Army Faction and the Beider-Meinhof Gang in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Weather Underground in the United States, and the Front de la Liberation du Quebec in Canada. Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil are not terrorists and their tactics are not violent (they are careful not to actually do permanent damage to the paintings; it is more stunt than iconoclasm). However, they do treat the masses as Socrates treated the people of Athens: a big slow dumb horse that needs to be stung into action by heroic self-assertion. They will be no more successful than the youthful militants of the 1960s (or Socrates, for that matter).

They will not be successful because they fail to understand the way in which the energy forms upon which we have relied from the 19th to the 21st centuries create real path dependencies. Imagine you are on a flight over the ocean. If something goes wrong, the pilot has to decide whether to turn around or continue to the destination. The further the plane flies towards the destination the more turning around becomes the wrong choice. Once the plane crosses the half way point the distance travelled means that the better choice is to continue to to the destination. The past exerts pressure on the future by shaping the rationality of the decisions that must be taken in the present.

Path dependency is the pressure that a certain pattern of cumulative past activity exerts on the present. The pilot cannot simply park the plane; they must go back or forward. Past the mid-way point the rational choice is to continue to their destination. Societies too: they cannot simply stop producing energy, for life is, at the barest root, energy exchange between organisms and environment. Everything we do, from painting sunflowers to throwing tomato soup on them presupposes the transformation of energy. We cannot simply park the plane, we have to go forward or backwards.

Perhaps circumstances will drive us backwards. A truly global catastrophe could generate a series of extremely violent and chaotic struggles that consumes everything in a destructive conflagration many times the magnitude of destructive intensity of the barbarian assaults on Rome. The resulting world disorder would undoubtedly lead to a reduction in energy demand, but only because all of the positive creations of the modern industrial world: power grids, computer server farms, transportation, and industry would be destroyed. Human life would start over, as it started over in Europe after the collapse of the great classical civilizations. Perhaps future generations would, long after the trauma of the war years, learn to live technologically simpler and more satisfying lives. But the cost would be massive in terms of present lives ruined and lost.

So let's hope for the forward possibility. Along with many other theorists and activists I have argued that the path forward leads towards socialism. I understand socialism as a democratically planned economy which produces for the sake of maximizing life-value and not money profits for capitalists. It is neither a steady-state nor a growth for the sake of growing profit economy but internally regulated by the goals of comprehensive satisfaction of the fundamental needs of each and all for the sake of the all-round development of the capacities for experience, thought, relationship, and creative activity.

While those goals sound as though they could licence unlimited demands on the natural environment, they must be understood as qualified by the “life-coherence principle” first defined by John McMurtry. This principle states that any public policy, including democratically decided economic plans, must take into account: the carrying capacity of the natural environment, its ability to absorb wastes, and the needs of all other people and sentient life-forms (the later relative to the degree of their organic capacities– dolphins therefore count for more than bacteria). When we think about our needs and the activities and experiences that make life meaningful and good in light of this principle, I believe that we will discover our fundamental needs are much more limited than the scope of consumer desires stimulated under capitalism. Satisfying them would, therefore, require less energy than is currently consumed, even if a far greater number of people are able to satisfy far more of their fundamental needs. With more free time we could cultivate what really matters in life: learning to pay more focused attention to the beauty of the world, cultivating our capacities for mutualistic relationship, and enjoying our sheer presence beneath the stars. In any case, the socialism that I envisage cannot be built if we do not free ourselves from the rat race drive to accumulate more and more things.

But here is the problem: freeing ourselves from the rate race desire for things is not enough. We still have to change the institutions and dynamics of this society. These institutions and dynamics exert real pressure, as I tried to explain briefly above. The biggest hurdle facing socialists is not the resurgence of the right or ruling class power generally (although those are very large problems indeed). The biggest the problem is finding transitional forms of life so that people can survive the move from one form of society to another.

The paint and potato throwers ignore this most fundamental problem. They believe that by the moral example they set the scales will fall from everyone’s eyes and they will awaken, like St. Paul, to the error of their past ways and be reborn in the spirit of renewable energy. But even if people are moved to reflect upon the realities of climate change for the first time, they cannot, as individuals, do anything to reduce the consumption of fossil fuels in the short term. The reality is that not only luxuries (corporate jets) but absolute basic necessities require energy inputs from burning fossil fuels. If we did indeed “just stop oil” –and coal and natural gas– tomorrow, people in the Northern hemisphere would freeze, there would be a collapse of global food supply, and there would be mass unemployment on a scale never seen before. As the still evolving crisis in Europe shows, the far right is much better positioned than the socialist left to benefit from such a massive crisis at this point in time. They do not intend to, but the drastic policies recommended by Just Stop Oil would much more likely result in far right or fascist governments (if indeed any government survived the almost immediate collapse of existing institutions).

The Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion activists, like the elitist social reformers that Marx criticized in the Theses on Feuerbach, abstract themselves from society and position themselves outside of and above it. They anoint themselves prophets and preach from on high about how everyone should live. But how we live is not a matter of abstract individual choice. My house and millions of other Canadian’s houses are heated by natural gas. It will be cold soon. I cannot just decide to switch to electric heating, and even if I did it, the electricity to heat my home would still have to be generated and much of it in Ontario is generated in natural gas burning generator stations. The power grid cannot be transformed overnight. Since we cannot do with power, we cannot, tomorrow, “just stop oil.”



The solution to this problem, as with all complex social problems, is time. Shouting from the roof tops that there is no more time and we have to change drastically RIGHT NOW or we ALL WILL DIE is stupidly hyperbolic and in any case, practically useless. As I argued above, an immediate cessation of fossil fuel use would cause immense death and social destruction. The social reality is that if the energy transition that is coming one way or the other (oil and natural gas will run out) is to build upon the best of what we have achieved over the past two hundred years rather than destroy it, it will have to be gradual. That gradual transformation is well underway.

As for the damage that climate change is causing in different parts of the globe, the reality is that we will have to adapt to it, socially, politically, and economically. Adaptation and social change are not exclusive choices. Climate change or no, our environment is dynamic and we along with every other organism on the planet have to adapt to changing circumstances all the time. While I am sure that I am guilty of sometimes lazily writing as if the the world will end tomorrow unless we overcome capitalism today, catastrophism serves no political purpose and sells creative human intelligence too short. Our ancestors survived ice ages with few tool but the big brains we share with them. But the practical application of our creative intelligence takes time and no schoolkid stunts will change this reality.

## Coincidence

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Finally, after three weeks, the sun poked through the relentless low-slung clouds. I felt inspired to take a walk. I headed to the railway tracks not far from my house and walked along the rails for a few blocks. Trying to balance along the slick steel brought me back to my childhood when the train tracks across the street from my house provided hours and hours of varied amusements. My friends and I would have contests to see who could walk furthest along the rails without falling, calibrate our stride to the distance between the ties, following the tracks deeper into the bush. I built up an excellent rock collection from the ore that would fall from the train cars. When the winter was particularly snowy we would jump from the trestle into the big drifts, burying ourselves in powder and laughter. We would also put pennies on the tracks and then hunt for the paper thin remnant, delighted when we found it squished to three or four times its normal size, the queen's face smoothed out by the mass of one hundred ore cars clacking across it. I never see kids playing on the tracks near my current home. If I did maybe I would teach them the trick with the penny (but in our too uptight age I would probably get arrested).

I left the tracks and continued walking, my nostalgic reveries giving way to philosophical reflections. What is one experiencing when one remembers? The naive view is that memories are like snap shots and when we recollect we open up a shoe box in our mind and go through the photographs. The reality is that there is no shoe box in your brain to open and sort through. The memories you think you have stored in your mental attic are actually products of the act of recall (and so, re-creations, not recollections. Of course, the content was shaped by past experience (we do not invent ourselves anew every moment out of nothing; we have a past that has shaped our present). But if we had a time machine we would be shocked at how many of the details that we would swear are "etched in our mind forever" differ, perhaps quite fundamentally, from the shape in which we remember them. As for their meaning? That changes as we integrate our past into our present. Like the events of world history, the meaning of our personal histories changes and develops. We can revise what we thought that we knew about ourselves.

If we think that our present is shaped by our past, if the person that we are, our identity, is a function of past experiences, but those experiences are not fixed copies of earlier events but present-day recreations, then it seems to follow that our identity is not some substantial reality that we carry around with us, but an on-going production or performance. My point is not that people interpret their past to suit their present (although they do) or that we can be whomever we want to be, but that identity is more a practice of identifying and synthesizing than it is any sort of "true" self inside you.

When I returned home I made a tea and sat on the couch to continue reading Orhan Pamuk's novel *The White Castle*. The book recounts the life history of a Venetian youth captured at sea by the Turks and given by the Pasha as a slave to a determined but none too bright scholar. Night after night the two argue, plan, and invent, but over the course of several evenings they write historical narratives of their experiences, labouring under the belief that "just as a man can view

his appearance in a mirror, he could examine his essence within his own thoughts.” But the novel raise questions about identity, giving us reason to wonder who it is we see even when we look in a mirror. The Venetian slave and the Turkish master look remarkably like one another: when they are the mirror to each other, who do they see? The Sultan for whom they collectively work further complicates their self-identity, playing a game with himself over the years in which he tried to decipher what in the treatises presented to him as authored by Hoja the master what was written by the Venetian slave. Do we become someone else if others think we have become someone else? If we switched identities with another person, would we really become them? Can we ever answer the question they set out to answer in their excavation of their life-histories: “Why I am what I am?”

Ask yourself what you are. Is the answer not both multiple and open? I am a citizen of Canada, a philosophy professor, a partner to Josie, a lover of cats, hockey, food and drink. One could go on listing interest, talents, capacities, experiences, strengths, weaknesses, virtues, sins. Would a fixed essence, some “true self,” emerge? How could it? If one tried to write one’s essence down night after night, it would have to change because something new would have happened in the previous day. Whatever the “self” is, it is not some thing apart from what the person does and experiences. As experiences change so the content of one’s identity must change. “I am large, I contain multitudes,” wrote Walt Whitman, and they do not all hang together coherently but contradict each other. I am not the child who jumped off the trestle into snow piles, and yet that child was me.

Is the self then just Hume’s jumble of changing impressions without any unity or coherence? Is Nietzsche correct to argue that the logical principle of identity is an invention that satisfies a human need for order but expresses nothing of the nature of reality? Is everything just change, difference, contradiction, while order and unity are constructions imposed by humans who need to manage the chaos?

If we answer yes, then we are confronted by another contradiction. If the unified self is a fiction, who writes it? Who is it if not “Hume” who looks into *himself* and sees nothing a jumble of changing feelings, desires, and perceptions? Who is it that wonders whether he is himself the Venetian slave or Hoja the master for whom he works? If I am not I, then who is the I that is presupposed even by the formulation of the question? Whitman (and all of us, hopefully), *contain* multitudes, but we are not multitudes of different people.

So what, then, is the I which functions as the subject of all of our experiences? If it is anything at all, I think that it is more like what Kant believed it to be: a power or practice of integration and synthesis than any fixed, substantive identity. One’s “true self” does not coincide with any set of contents, commitments, beliefs, desires, or goals. If “authenticity” means anything or has any value it is not as commitment to some unchanging ideal but as a willingness to be responsible for one’s words and deeds. The contents of the self are dynamic, and that is a good thing. If the self were some one fixed thing it would persist unchanged throughout life, the same now as at birth. But we have no memory of our earliest years precisely because the capacity for integration and synthesis had not developed. That emerges only with cognitive maturation. The I that seems to persist through time is not some thing inside us but a power or ability to integrate new experiences and connect them up more or less coherently with past experiences. But that on-

going integration project is constructive: we are not just adding material onto a preexisting shape that remains the same. The process of integrating new material is a process of self-creation.

We do not create ourselves out of nothing and we cannot simply imagine ourselves into being anyone or anything that we want. Even an author is constrained by the logic of character development that emerges from the writing of the novel. Characters can change and develop but they cannot morph from paragraph to paragraph into completely new people. If they did, the novel would be incoherent. History and material forces are constraints on who we are and limit who we can create ourselves to be.

However- and this point is, I think, crucial for understanding the possibility of human freedom—history and material constraints do not *determine the power of integration*. The logic of self-construction is not out there, in the order of things, it is within us. At some point in our development (which probably coincides with language acquisition) we begin to experience the world as an “I.” We become conscious of the difference between the content of the experience and the self that has the experience: we become self-conscious. Because we distinguish between self and world in this way we can compare feeling, desire, and needs to the world in which we live. We can therefore experience lack as well as fullness: we can tell when the world is not satisfying our needs. Moreover, we can talk to others and find out if they are facing similar problems. We can then, together, investigate causes and, if organization is successful and objective conditions propitious, make changes.

Life becomes richer with greater experience and wider and deeper ranges of activity. The best life, I would argue, is marked by openness to change, growth, and development (even if all are painful). It is not only obsession with the past that impedes the growth of life-value, social structures and institutions can limit the range of experiences that it is possible to have. In those cases, collective effort to change those institutions is necessary. However, if the self were to dissolve into the different contents (as both Hume and Nietzsche in their own ways believe) its capacity to value life would dissolve with along with it. However mysterious its emergence might be, the I, self-consciousness, is the precondition of their being any life-value at all. But that value is not a fixed object to be excavated from the past but a living experience of the present. Why you are what you are is not as important as what you will make yourself to be.

## Determinatio Est Negatio

Originally posted 25 October, 2022

This principle of classical logic can help us wade through the confused swamp of contemporary liberal ideas of inclusion and diversity. First, it helps us sort out the logical confusions implicit in these arguments, confusions which, if followed to their ultimate conclusion, would make all language use and social practice impossible. Understanding the logical absurdities implicit in the liberal arguments then helps us understand the real political value of inclusion and diversity by allowing us to distinguish between benign and malignant forms of exclusion and ethically coherent and incoherent forms of inclusion.

The phrase “*determinatio est negatio*” is Latin for “determination is negation.” The basic idea is simple: When we define a term, we explicitly identify a positive trait or traits that distinguishes the object and we also, implicitly, exclude all other objects of a different type from being instances of things of that class. So when we define “apple,” we give some set of distinguishing properties that differentiates that class of fruit from other classes of fruits. To define an apple as “a” is logically equivalent to saying that all not-a’s are not-apples, and all apples are not not-a’s (*determinatio est negatio*).

What the principle makes clear is that definitions mark classes of things off from one another. If we could not mark classes of things off from one another we could not meaningfully speak of anything at all. Consider what follows from the contradiction: “a is not-a.” If a is identical to its opposite, then a is both everything and no-thing at all. Consider the apple example. If apples, are not-a (not apples), then apples are oranges, grapes, and so on to infinity, because it is true that oranges etc. are not apples, and if apples are not-apples, then they are oranges, etc.

Confused? You should be. The consequence of denying in any strong sense that categories function by excluding different things from inclusion in a given set leads to logical absurdity and logical absurdity leads to practical inability to communicate. As Aristotle said to skeptics who doubted the principle of non-contradiction (violated in the example above), their own behaviour refutes their skepticism. The skeptic wants to go to Megara and not Thebes, Aristotle argues, and he organizes his activity accordingly. In practical life the skeptic does not believe that Thebes is Megara and Megara Thebes, but rather that Thebes is Thebes and Megara is Megara. There is a difference between them that can be named and that even the skeptic uses to organize their choices and activities. If I ask for an apple and you give me an orange, I will tell you that you have made a mistake. Either you misunderstood what I asked for or you do not know what an apple is.

It might sound as though this argument depends on an old and discredited idea of the world as divided up into eternal natural kinds distinguished from one another by fixed essences. However, the crucial point remains unchanged if we think of the members of classes designated by concepts as bearing only a “family resemblance” to one another (to use Wittgenstein’s metaphor) and not an absolute, unchanging identity. Thinking of categories a little more loosely actually better accords with the dynamic nature of reality. Indeed, Darwin’s revolutionary insight concerned the process by which species develop into different species. Darwin argued that there

is no rigid distinction between a species and a variety. Over time, varieties can become species. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of experience and the need to make sense of the world, we distinguish apples from pears and pears from peaches, even though all belong to the same family. When I ask for an apple, I want an apple, not a peach. One goes to Megara or to Thebes.

What does this foray into the logic of classification have to do with contemporary political reality? Quite a lot. One of the most unfortunate developments of the Trump and post-Trump era is a return to the same superficial politics of language that consumed a segment of the left in the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas in the 80's and 90's the political arguments were hidden behind a thick blanket of post-structuralist philosophical fog, today's arguments come in the form of easier-to-see-through liberal feel good ideas of diversity and inclusion. Thus, we are enjoined to avoid all words that "exclude" others and find alternatives that purportedly "include" everyone.

Consider one of the most imbecilic examples: the suggestion that we should substitute "birthing person" for "mother." The argument maintains that "mother" is exclusionary because there are same sex parent couples, transwomen who identify as women but cannot give birth, etc who could care for children but feel excluded because they would not fall under the definition of mother as a woman who has given birth to a child. But the problems with the suggestion are immediately apparent. There are, in reality, women, adult females, who give birth. There are not, in material reality, males who give birth. Identifying as a woman does not confer the ability to give birth. So there is a class of human beings who are female and give birth and they, in all languages of which I am aware, and for several thousands of years, have been designated by the term "mother" (and its equivalent in other languages). One can refer to mothers as birthing persons if one wishes, but it does not change the material reality of the person so named. "Mother" and "birthing person" are synonyms, i.e., they mean the same thing because they refer to the same creature. The later is, from a logical point of view, as exclusionary as the former: *determinatio est negatio*.

To insist on "inclusive language" as an end in itself, in abstraction from material differences that make a difference (to borrow a turn of phrase from Richard Bernstein's essay on Richard Rorty), compromises our ability to make clear sense of the world but also leaves the politically problematic form of exclusion untouched. Exclusion becomes a political problem when it based on the demonization of morally arbitrary properties of people. Consider two examples. To exclude Black people from higher education is unjust, because Black people have the same need for education and capacity to learn and contribute to the development of knowledge as everyone else. To exclude gays and lesbians from the right to marry their partner is unjust because gays and lesbians love as fully as heterosexual people. If one thinks that marriage is the highest expression of love, then every couple who is in love and wants to marry should have that right, because the relevant criterion of who should marry is mutual love, not the sexual orientation of the lovers.

Neither problem has anything to do with inclusive and exclusive language, but with fundamental violations of the principle of equal treatment and access to resources and institutions. The racism at the heart of any policy that would bar Blacks from higher education lies in the demonstrably false belief that Blacks are intellectually inferior to whites. Overcoming the racism means transforming the exclusionary *structure* of the institution, the socio-economic causes of that

structure, and the racist ideology that legitimated it. If Blacks are going to be forced into menial labour, then there would be no point allowing them to access higher education (the same would apply to women in a sexist society and workers of all races and sexes and genders in a capitalist society). The solution is to change the socio-economic causes, the exclusionary rules that govern the institutions, and the racist ideologies that legitimate the violations of the principle of equality. Those are very different than claiming (as we sometimes unfortunately hear) that math or other disciplines are themselves racist. Math is a logical system, its rules apply everywhere the same (and if there were ever a multicultural science math would be it. Core concepts on which modern mathematics depend originated in India (zero) and the Arab world (algebra)).

An analogous argument holds with regard to gay and lesbian marriage. Marriage arrangements traditionally had as much to do with property and children as with love. Hence it originated as a heterosexual institution. But a wide variety of feminist and gay and lesbian struggles transformed its traditional structure and brought into view the inegalitarian nature of the traditional institution and the sexist and heteronormative ideology that supported it. The problem was not the definition of “man” and wife,” which continues to work perfectly well in cases of heterosexual marriage, but restricting marriage vows to men and women when there were same sex couples who loved each other just as deeply and wanted to express that love through taking marriage vows. As with racism in the educational system, the solution was institutional change, not playing around with the words whose meaning had nothing to do with the problematic exclusion.

By contrast with these cases, it is not unjust that I will be excluded from the Canadian men’s soccer team for the upcoming World Cup. Even though I am Canadian, a man, and, in my younger days could be found on Friday afternoon’s in Dufferin Park in Toronto playing soccer (between cigarettes) with other PhD students (we were not as bad as you might imagine), I am not a good enough player. Exclusions based upon material differences, practical incapacity, or lack of interest, are not unjust and language that captures these differences are therefore not oppressive even though they do exclude the opposite. There are men’s and women’s national soccer teams and it is not wrong that men play on one and women on the other. That difference need not be fixed for all time. Advances in nutrition, training, (and perhaps genetic engineering) might reduce to meaninglessness the physiological differences between men and women and in some future men and women (or the cyborgs that replace them) will play on the same team (should cyborgs still want to play sports). Whether that socio-evolutionary trajectory is a good one is beyond the scope of this intervention. My point is such a development would change physical facts on the ground and revolutionize the organization of team sports (and everything else). But while we are as we are, it is not illegitimately exclusionary to have two different teams.

The point is: exclusions are illegitimate when they are rooted in ideologies of invidious difference which themselves typically support grossly unequal socio-economic structures of power and wealth. Likewise, inclusions are good when they draw people with a relevant interest and talent into a group, institution, or practice to which they have something that they want to contribute. But not every group, institution, or practice need be universally inclusive. Indeed, none *could* be and still maintain their distinction from other groups, institutions, and practices. Universal inclusion would mean that everyone belongs to everything which would be tantamount (as in the example of the violation of the principle of non-contradiction above) to negating the

differences that distinguish different groups etc. from each other. Universal inclusion would destroy diversity.

The goal of egalitarian struggle has to be overcoming oppressive structures and dismantling the ideologies that support them. The platitudinous use of terms like exclusion and inclusion divorced from an analysis of material inequalities and real differences leaves the depth causes of oppression unchanged and impedes the ability to communicate. It makes people afraid to say anything at all less they offend someone, which is hardly a recipe for deeper mutual understanding or more coherently inclusive societies. . That which is offensive are not the particularities and specificities that distinguish things but the structures of power that reduce the majority of people to exploitable objects.



## II: Evocations



## **Pride of Spitalfields**

Originally posted 3 December, 2022

History smells of boots and damp  
and ghosts of cigarettes past  
smoked inside  
white stucco walls  
by drinkers  
hunched on low stools  
beneath milk lights and a white tin ceiling.  
The room is  
warm with laughter and alcohol.  
Outside,  
relentless grey November sky  
grimaces.  
Work is tomorrow's problem.  
Alone with my pint,  
eye and mind wander  
to the next table  
where some old gaffer has fallen asleep,  
hand on a mug

that reminds me of the ones  
my father would bring  
home  
from the Beerfest every June.

Across from me,  
a collection of beer bottles  
remind me of  
parents' basement  
bars.

A grimy jar  
collects change for  
the Tower Hamlet Scouts.

I think:

These scenes come unbidden  
and the mind  
stitches them together  
into a double world.

The sinews of memory  
connect  
everything to everything else.

The old guy looks like Philip Larkin.

Balding head slightly cocked,  
horn rim glasses,

mouth open,  
a grotesque foreshadowing,  
perhaps,  
of a death not far off.  
Someone asks:  
Is he ok?  
Someone else nods,  
and goes back to their conversation  
about dry wall and delivery dates.  
The sleeper is left alone,  
perhaps to replay in dreams  
his first pint,  
who knows how many decades ago,  
when he was thin,  
sitting close to the cute girl  
from the office that he fancied,  
letting a testing thigh touch hers,  
like the toad-woman  
now squeezing into the banquette  
next to a lithe young man.  
Her husband,  
at the bar,  
orders a half pint for himself

and an improbable white wine for her  
while “Moon and NYC” plays.

And I remember

Cooper Union

and walking down St.Mark’s Place  
for the first time.

I see the old timer’s hearing aid.

The last time I was home,

sipping a beer

in what used to be called

The Royale,

some old miners

across from me

seemed politely bored

by the rookie’s story

about his first week underground.

They nodded like old miners nod:

quietly and softly,

their ears and backs ruined

from decades of drilling-blasting-mucking.

Everyone earns their pint

and drinks it

in their own good time.

A fist has smashed the  
safety glass of the bathroom window.

Shards radiate out from the point of impact  
like the shatter cones  
I've seen on 2 billion year old rocks  
near the High Falls in Onaping.

And I think:

The geometry of natural and social violence  
is consistent.

Mind is sinew and mirror  
connecting everything  
to everything else:  
space to time,  
rocks to fists,  
old miners to old Englishmen.

That which does not kill you  
makes you tired,  
ready to give up the fight  
against the sufficient reason  
why things are so  
and not otherwise.

Outside, banging on the door,  
an infinite number of insufficient reasons

struggle to undermine you.

Life is pressure

that pushes back

for a time

but before it finally

gives out

you rest,

eyes closed,

mouth open

with a pint waiting

on the small oak table

for when you wake up.

When you are tempted

to feel sorry

for the old timer

asleep in his local

or the exhausted mom

coming home on the bus

remind yourself

that they

are still alive

and pushing back.

In Tottenham Court Station,

in the long corridor

connecting the Northern to the Central Line

I heard a voice of smoke and honey.

The singer had no arm below the elbow

but had attached a mechanism

that allowed him to play.

I used to think: one needs a wrist to strum.

But I was wrong.

One needs imagination and desire.





## Irene From the Pier

Originally posted 26 August, 2022

“Oh, look!”

Blue eyes ablaze,

her hand,

an ancient passion,

holds my arm:

“Oh! I like this one!”

“Are you from Sydney?”

“I’m Irene Gillis!

I’m

from

The Pier!”

Whitney Pier:

unloader of coal,

roaster of coke,

roller of steel,

emancipator from mental slavery.

Home.

“Is where?/am I?/these beige walls/why?/am I inside?/children’s drawings/pacing, the hallway,  
pacing is good/Oh!/Look/I like/is it?Who?/is it time?/I/am I?”

Her consciousness,

a pencil of light,

a miner’s lamp on the black coal seam,

a quasar spinning  
in the infinite dark of space:  
I am/she is/she was/I was  
Who?  
Here.  
Gone.  
“Ieyyeee!!  
Where?/The Pier/Yes!/Once...  
I was  
floating in the grey waves  
of Dominion Bay,  
looking up at the grey sky.  
the waves thudded on the shores:  
vault doors slamming closed  
in a concrete room.  
The foam crabbed its way up the  
coal dust beach.  
I bobbed further out,  
spreading in every direction,  
touching every shore and every port  
that I –Irene from the Pier–  
would never see.  
Youth moves to the time

of sea and stone.

“They said: ‘Life is hard.’”

I learned it is not hard,

it is not soft.

Life is life.

You live it

until it closes in,

closes you in.

Here.

Even the biggest rock

gets ground to sand.

Life has a way of shrinking you,

and dragging you back.

Sea to sea,

sand to sand.

Everything returns to its kind.

What?/I was/Where?/is it?/You now!/Who?”

Her eyes distant.

Where has what has been gone?

“Ieyeee!!”

screams Irene from the Pier.

“Where/who?/is it time for?/No!/Oh! Look at this one!”

Sea to sea,

sand to sand ...

Where?

These walls and corridors.

Beige.

Pacing.

“Take me with you.”

Who?

I am I.

A point

from which no line

will extend.

## **Last Light/Poem for the End of Time**

Originally posted 12 May, 2023

Early May sun filters  
through the green leaves.  
The smell of new growth  
makes you melancholy.  
You miss the trips you will not take,  
the books you will not read,  
the joys you will not feel.  
The horizon is a tease:  
The closer you get  
the more it reveals  
but when you try to touch  
it eludes your caress.  
On the table,  
prescriptions pile higher  
than party invitations.  
Every phone call could be more bad news.  
If you are not dying,  
someone else is.  
Unblessed is he who can imagine

more than he can live.

At least mornings are quiet.

The world had not yet re-started,

when the words came back to you:

“Death is a disease

so why not cure it?”

You could bear the loss

of mother and father,

friends and lovers,

but were undone

by that “special way of being afraid”

your own death inspired.

Sages say: “Take care and let go,”

but you were never good at listening.

You hung on,

trying to live long enough

to live forever;

a singular weightless idea,

forming and reforming at will,

free of everything

but the memory

you need

to keep stitching it all together.

But the gods and physics concur:

in the beginning was

the dark.

We seek the light,

but it only limns the edges

of all pervading space.

Every seam a self-expanding centre,

dough that stretches

but does not tear.

In the beginning there was

and in the end there shall be

neither life nor death,

neither up nor down,

neither good nor bad,

but only “darkness concealing darkness,”

like the layers of black

in Ad Reinhardt’s paintings,

rebellious against

enframing,

at war with time;

the space that will consume these worlds.

Look! Last Man:

The galaxies are pulling away.



Look! Last man,  
the last star has blinked out.

Listen! Last man,  
to your own cry of woe.

Feel! Last man,  
the “terrifying silence  
of these infinite spaces.”

Think! Last man:

One thousand trillion years  
has come down to the last second.

No life is so long  
that it cannot be replayed in an instant.

Tick. Tock.

The final grain is poised to fall  
to the bottom of the hour glass.

The higher the wave, the harder it crashes

into the merciless embrace

of the geometry,

of nothingness nothinging

into more nothing that will

nothing forever.

You were in the bath

the first time

that you first read:

“we come from the dark,  
and we go into the dark again.”

Such an eloquent summation.

It has come for you now,  
soft and silent.

Inspired by Katie Mack’s *The End of Everything* on the physics of the different ways the universe might end, especially Chapter 5 on the “Big Rip.” In this scenario, space is essentially a dark energy, a repulsive force that will ultimately tear all matter apart leaving a nothingness that quite literally continues to expand into more nothingness. The idea struck me as beautiful as it was terrifying.

“Special way of being afraid,” from Philip Larkin’s “Aubade.”

“Live long enough...” an allusion to Aubrey De Gray, *Live Long Enough to Live Forever*.

“Darkness concealing darkness” from the “Hymn to Nothingness” in the *Rig Veda*.

“The space that will destroy...” an allusion to and a play on Krishna’s warning to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, that he is “all consuming time” that has arisen to destroy the world.

“Last man” refrains are allusions to Nietzsche’s “Oedipus.”

“Terrifying silence...” Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*.

“We come from the dark...” Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*.

## III: Readings



## Readings: Howard Woodhouse: Critical Reflections on Teacher Education: Why Future Teachers Need Educational Philosophy

Originally post, 9 June, 2023

Howard Woodhouse is Professor Emeritus and Co-Director of the Saskatchewan Process Philosophy Research Unit in the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Saskatchewan. *Critical Reflections on Teacher Education* is both a resume of his long career as a philosopher and teacher and a diagnosis and suggestions for cures of the malaise of the school system and teacher education. In this slim but complex volume he argues that the continued intrusion of capitalist market values into schools has extended to the curriculum and methods of faculties of education. If left unchecked, this tendency will undermine the capacity of future teachers for critical reflection and autonomous judgement, turning them into little more than transmission belts for government policy and corporate interests. “Without a basic understanding of philosophical issues and their relationship to educational practice” he writes, new teachers “will become lost in the demands of hierarchical school systems that emphasize conformity to rules and policies, which negate the necessary autonomy of qualified judgement defining their profession.” (1) That this transformation would negate the vocation of educators to enable students’ intellectual growth is of no concern to today’s self-styled “reformers.” Woodhouse’s argument alerts educators to the crisis, explains the importance of philosophy to teacher education, and makes a number of practical suggestions for the transformation of classrooms at all institutional levels.

He supports his argument with evidence drawn from his own long career as a philosopher, from the educational philosophy of Bertrand and Dora Russell (and to a lesser extent, John Dewey), the philosophy for children movement, and the place-based educational philosophy and practice of Indigenous communities from whom he has learned in Saskatchewan. He integrates these distinct strands of argument by showing how they are forms of “life-value,” a term he adopts from the work of John McMurtry. McMurtry’s epochal philosophical achievement was to have demonstrated that all values are functions of the needs and capacities of living, sentient beings. Whatever is of value either serves living things as a resource that satisfies their needs or is an expression of their sentient, intellectual, or creative capacities. The Russell’s’ understanding of education as growth, the cultivation of the philosophical capacities of children, and the First Nation’s understanding that scientific knowledge grows up out of lived experience of the nurturing power of the land are all expressions of this underlying principle.

His latest critique of the intrusion of market values into the educational system extends the reasoning of his previous book, *Selling Out*, from the university system into the primary and secondary school systems. Both books build on the pioneering argument of McMurtry’s “Education and the Market Model” (*Paideusis*, 1991). In that seminal paper, McMurtry contrasted the values that rule the capitalist market place (all goods are understood as saleable commodities available for purchase by anyone willing to pay the price) with the value that organizes educational systems (the growth of intellect and sensibility through conjoint efforts with teachers in structured but open-ended inquiry). As is evident, the value that organizes educational systems is undermined to the extent that market values invade. To become educated, students must struggle to understand; the burden of inquiry cannot be alleviated through a cash

transaction. The work must continue until insight has been achieved, only to start again, in search of deeper and more comprehensive understanding. If education were a commodity then the insights could be purchased, but even if one could buy diplomas they would not acquire the cultivated intelligence that the piece of paper signifies. The problem is solved, McMurtry and Woodhouse both worry, by transforming the content of education. Instead of open ended inquiry schooling becomes a matter of mechanical skill acquisition, efficiently delivered and standardized tested.

The book is organized into five pithy chapters. Each begins with a short personal reflection that motivates the philosophical argument to come. Despite their concision, each is richly illustrated with appropriate historical evidence. The first chapter details the way in which the market model has infiltrated faculties of education in Canada, the UK, and the US. The consequence for future teachers is that their careers will be “reduced to that of technicians working to advance the goals of the market.” (11) However, even that reduction is only a first step. The ‘reformers’ ultimately aim at doing away with living teachers altogether. Woodhouse cites Robert Heterich, president of Educom, an academic-corporate consortium, who advocates “‘remov[ing] the human mediation ... and replac[ing] it with automation’ ... to reduce unit costs and programme students for the market.”(24) The emergence of ChatGPT perhaps brings this dream closer than educators might have feared.

To the objection that machines cannot teach because machines cannot think, technocrats will respond (as they do in the case of “artificial” intelligence), by redefining teaching as that which the teacher bot can do. Human intelligence is bound up with our self-conscious awareness of our vulnerable being-in-the-world. Therefore, it is not algorithmic, even if some basic operations can be formalized and replicated by machine functioning. All intelligent reflection and action is bound up with meaningful interpretation and caring interacting with the natural and social environment. However impressive the operations of technologies like ChatGPT, they are not alive, do not care, and therefore cannot produce meaningful interpretations of the problems their creators claim they can help solve. However, this objection disappears if intelligence is defined as the machinic assembly of sentences. If students are taught that intelligence is the execution of algorithms then, after a few generations, that is what everyone will believe intelligence is, and the existential basis of the criticism will be undermined.

The same fate awaits teaching if technocrats like Heterich win. All teachers have to rely on routines and rules of thumb which those who would eliminate the teacher believe can be formalized and programmed into a machine. However, as with human intelligence, the affective and communicative core of teaching would be eliminated. Teaching is not the efficient transmission of information; teaching is the multi-sided ability to frame problems in such a way that students form the desire to investigate it on their own. Only through their own efforts can students grow intellectually. The role of the teacher is to help them find their way into whatever problem is under investigation. If students are taught that education is simply the efficient assimilation of skills and data, then they will lose the affective connection to problems that genuine education stimulates. The result will be that the human project terminates in our having replaced ourselves with machines. What will replace the role of effort and striving as sources of meaning in our lives no one can say.

Woodhouse exposes the supreme danger of these trends. He anchors his alternative vision in the educational philosophy of Bertrand and Dora Russell. Woodhouse demonstrates that, despite his occasional lapse into scientism, Russell was, at heart, a humanist and the educational philosophy that he and Dora developed placed the free development of the student at its centre. For the Russells, educational systems should be modelled on the principle of living development that governs the natural world: “The metaphor of growth runs throughout Bertrand and Dora’s educational philosophy ... “the humanistic conception of education” they write ‘regards the child as a gardener regards a young tree ... as something with an intrinsic nature, which will develop into an admirable form, given proper soil and air and light.’”(34) Gardening is both joyous and terrifying: one plants the seeds in well-prepared ground but one cannot force them to grow. So too with teaching: the teacher prepares the ground by framing the problem in ways that the students can understand, but then must trust the students to do the work themselves. As the gardener cannot force the tree to grow, so too the teacher cannot brow beat the students to learn. Their task is not to force but to enliven the inner principle, the “desire to know” which, as Aristotle said, lies at the root of human relationship to the world.

Even when well-intentioned, the move to turn teachers into testable skill-transmitters would destroy the nature of education. Anyone can memorize times tables; writing *Principia Mathematica* requires imagination and drive, not just mastery of the rules of formal logic. ChatGPT can assemble sentences, but until it feels the joy of awakening each morning and the utter desolation of the loss of a loved one, poetry will elude it. Education enables students to find their own voice: some as mathematicians, perhaps, and some as poets, but all as sensitive, reflective, confident but not dogmatic citizens of the world. To become educated is to become alive to the world as a question. Thinking is— as Dewey understood—active intervention into the order of things, the very opposite of parroting the correct slogan or learning what you need to say to get the job. The world will always exceed our grasp, but that is a good thing: the inherent questionability of things ensures that there will always be something meaningful for the next generation to do (as long as there is a next generation).

Despite Russell’s reputation as a stuffy and conservative analytic philosopher, criticism was central to his philosophical practice. “The essential characteristic of philosophy,” he argued, “which makes it a study distinct from science, is criticism. It examines critically the principles employed in science and in daily life, it searches out any inconsistencies there may be in these principles, and it only accepts them when, as the result of a critical inquiry, no reason for rejecting them has appeared.”(32) One can immediately see the importance of this practice of philosophy for teachers and students. If education is not to degenerate into indoctrination, then teachers must be able to think critically about the curriculum they are being asked to teach, and to have the intellectual courage to oppose curricula that suffocates thinking under dogma. By being critical themselves they will instill in students the *need* to intervene when unsupported arguments circulate as facts or when narrow ideology demonizes and attacks. However, a genuinely critical practice is humbling: no one has all the answers, every position can be questioned, and when one is the target of criticism one knows that one owes one’s interlocutor a reasoned argument.

This capacity for (self)-criticism is central to the vocation of philosophy and education, but it can also— if it is practiced as an end in itself— conflict with philosophy’s positive, life-serving

dimension. Life is not only opposition (although we must have the strength to oppose). Life is ultimately worth living because it is an opening to the beauty and magnificence of the universe. Social problems are problems precisely because they impede those who suffer from them from living—feeling, thinking, acting, relating, savouring, enjoying—to the fullest. The principle of life-enjoyment is the root which feeds all struggles. Criticism has to maintain connection with this root lest it degenerate into nihilistic skepticism or despair. Everything is open to challenge, true, but for the sake of expanding understanding, not drowning it in doubt. Woodhouse does not explicitly pose this sort of challenge to Russell’s definition of philosophy, but the final three chapters make clear that he is implicitly aware of these sorts of dangers.

The third chapter focuses on the principles and practices of the philosophy for children movement. First developed in distinct but related directions by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, the effort to incorporate philosophy at every level of education was motivated by the goal of freeing education from rigid bureaucratic structures. Instead of a teacher standing in front of the class drilling students until they can perform the appropriate repertoire, Lipman, Sharp, and their followers reconceived the relationship amongst learners as a “community of inquiry.”(61) Inspired in part by John Dewey’s understanding of education as problem-based inquiry, the proponents of philosophy for children wanted to turn the class room into an incubator of children’s native curiosity.(62) The teacher would be more shepherd and less drill sergeant and the child viewed as a unity of affect and intellect alive in wonder to the world, needing guidance but able to find their own way together with their co-explorers. Thinking of themselves as a community they would feel united in common purpose, but they would also understand that as a community of individual minds, each person sees the world from their own angle. Hence students would also discover for themselves the inevitability of disagreement, the need for dialogue, and respectful argument as the primary means for resolving disputes.

The movement has made some headway in Canada, the UK, the US, but Woodhouse is keen to stress that the trend has been away from philosophical education of any sort. Obviously, if teachers lack philosophical education they will be in no position to cultivate philosophical dispositions in their students. Philosophy is essentially a practice, not trivial familiarity with this or that thinker from the past. Woodhouse defends philosophy first as disposition and practice and second as an academic discipline. The life-value of the academic discipline is not expressed by the fact that exists but in the difference that it makes to those who study it. The development and nurturing of a philosophical disposition towards intelligent criticism in the service of truth and life-enjoyment must be the guiding idea.

No institution is more human than education. Animals learn but their cognitive capacities, no matter how impressive, are minute in comparison to human thought and feeling. It can expand to the edge of the universe and ask what still lies beyond; it can shrink to the size of a quark and imagine the world from that perspective; it is capable of the most tender and subtle refinements of meaning and a generator of metaphorical connection without limit, but poorly educated it is also capable of justifying genocidal violence. Thus, it is not hyperbole to argue that the human future depends upon the quality of our educational institutions and educators.

Woodhouse makes this connection between education and survival through the example of climate change. The final two chapters focus on the link between philosophical education for

teachers and their ability to motivate students to understand the problem and become the sort of engaged citizens who can help solve it. In order to advance his argument, Woodhouse draws inspiration and insight from the place-based learning at the heart of Indigenous societies. Drawing on the knowledge of both Elders and Indigenous intellectuals, Woodhouse shows how the holistic (affective, intellectual, practical, and spiritual) understanding of the complex interrelationships upon which life depends must be integral to life-valuable climate change education. Woodhouse cites Marie Batiste and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood to explain the connection between Indigenous and “Western” science. “The traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous peoples is scientific in the sense that it is empirical, experimental, and systematic. It differs in two important respects from Western science, however: traditional ecological knowledge is highly localized, and it is social. Its focus is on the web of relationships between humans, animals, plants, natural forces, and landforms in a particular locality, as opposed to the discovery of universal laws.” (89) While I agree that this difference is real, I do not think that it is best understood as a difference between Indigenous and “Western” forms of science.

The more important point that Batiste and Youngblood are making here, I would say, is that science has a common, practical root. Chemistry does not originate with the periodic table, but with cooking and other forms of life-serving transformation of substances. Taxonomy does not begin with Linnaeus but with long-evolved local understandings flora and fauna and their uses. Medicine does not begin with the MRI machine but with caring attention to vulnerable bodies and the medicinal properties of plants. It is true that the science that has developed since Galileo and Newton demands generalization of results expressed as mathematically formalized regularities, but I think that this demand should be understood as continuous with and a development of that much longer practical history of science rather than as cliched “Western” alternative to older forms of knowing. The mathematical notations that supposed “Western” science employs are not Western in origin but Egyptian and Greek (geometry), Indian (the all important value of 0), and Arabic (algebra). Science, practical and mathematical, has always been an international and cross-cultural practice. Like all forms of knowledge (including religious and philosophical) science can be deployed in ideological ways to justify domination. The best means to oppose this very unscientific use of science is to demonstrate its deeper and more cosmopolitan origins rather than (ironically) allow “the West” to take credit for the extraordinary and undeniable achievements of post-17th century mathematical natural science.

That said, the more important point is to insist upon the connection between genuine knowledge and the understanding, maintenance, and development of natural and social life-support systems. Woodhouse integrates the various strands of his argument by invoking McMurtry’s “primary axiom of value.” The axiom holds that all value whatsoever either serves life as a means of satisfying a need or expresses the sentient, intellectual, and creative powers of living things. The value of the engaged, reflective, and critical form of education that Woodhouse depends is clearly explained by the axiom. The human intellect needs education in order to develop its full range of abilities, and the educated person experiences life more fully, is capable of a greater range of activities, and is reflectively aware of the interests of others, other living things, and nature as a whole. Life cannot be lived anyway one wants or is able to pay for; since the world exists outside of our won minds and skins we must take into account the needs of others, contribute to their satisfaction in some way, and, overall, strive to live in way which are to “coherently inclusive” of the needs and goals of others.(98)



Education is our first and last line of defense. It must be approached as the hard but joyous work of exploring our universe and the problems of human social life together, in respectful but sometimes difficult argument. Cats and crows can master a few skills and we should admire them for it, but human intelligence is not the mastery of skills and teaching is not the transmission of information. If Covid taught teachers anything, it is that on line platforms are useful for transmitting information, but make actual pedagogical communication extremely difficult. The desire to learn develops best when living learners work together in shared space, challenging and inspiring each other to expand the circle of understanding ever wider.

## Readings: William MacAskill: What We Owe the Future

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From celebrity endorsements, (according to his blurb, the argument brought Joseph Gordon-Levitt to tears), to chatty asides about the difficulty of the entrance exam to All Souls College, Oxford (who cares?) and Derek Parfit's eccentricities (if he hated suffering so much, why did he make instant coffee from hot tap water?), there was much that annoyed me in this book. Perhaps I am just getting older and grouchier, or maybe the publisher made MacAskill include the anecdotes to make it more accessible. The stylistic annoyances can be set aside because MacAskill has written an important book. It confronts readers with one of the most challenging problem of our times: how to take account of and value the interests of people who do not yet exist but whose lives will be impacted by what you and I, indeed, everyone, chooses to do (or not do) in our lives. The importance of this argument is not only practical. If there is going to be a long term future for humanity then existing people will need to make political and personal, but also philosophical changes. MacAskill's argument challenges the ego-centric presentism that dominates the history of liberal ethical thought. The most important contribution the book makes is to help each of us understand that we are a part of a historical and temporal continuum. Since we owe our existence to the contributions of people no longer alive, we also owe it to people who are not yet born to take care (as Brecht said in *St. Joan of the Stockyards*) that we were not only good, but are leaving a good world.

Given that his "longtermism" cuts against the grain of the ego-centric assumptions of much liberal ethics (which worries about individuals being good and not so much about good worlds) MacAskill's argument is controversial. "Longtermism" is a fairly recent philosophical development. He defines longtermism as "the idea that positively influencing the longterm future is a key moral priority of our time."<sup>(4)</sup> It is rooted in the utilitarian tradition generally and the work of Derek Parfit more particularly. Utilitarians believe that what matters most in ethical life are outcomes, not intentions, and Parfit was one of the first (in his celebrated *Reasons and Persons*) to turn his attention to the interests of generations unborn. If we count the interests of people who do not yet but will exist, then our calculation of "the greatest happiness" will change. Depending on how long the species lasts, we might have to factor the interests of trillions of future people into our ethical deliberations. "If humanity survives to even a fraction of its potential life span, then, strange as it may seem, we are the ancients: we live at the beginning of history ... What we do now will affect untold numbers of future people. We need to act wisely."<sup>(5)</sup>

Critics tend to reply that this demand is absurd. No one can possibly take into account the interests of untold numbers of people into an open ended future. MacAskill is alive to this almost instinctual response to the longtermist principle, but his response is uneven. I support the basic thrust of his argument. If we treat value as a function of the experiences and activities of living beings, then their location in time is not as essential as the lives they lived, are living, or will live. If we strive to create the conditions for good lives, then present conditions which are sustainable over an open ended future are better (because they will support more living people) than conditions which will undermine the life-support capacity of nature and society in a shorter term.

The strength of MacAskill's argument is that he helps readers break free from the idea that we are islands of self-supporting consciousness buzzing about in a sea of other human atoms. The future is not some thing waiting about in limbo to be actualized fully at some distant time: the future is now, that into which the present is constantly developing. Its shape is not fixed but depends upon the choices you and I and everyone else make right now. These choices are shaped by the institutions and social forces acting upon us. "Do the very longterm consequences of our actions fade out over time, like ripples on a pond? No. Rather, every year, like clumsy gods, we radically change the course of history." (174) MacAskill is correct, but the way in which he tries to determine the goodness or badness of these consequences is both overly concrete and, in the end, overly abstract. Like the utilitarian traditions generally, MacAskill treats the problem of good lives as a function of the amount of "happiness" they contain and treats "happiness" as an experience that can be quantified. If happiness can be quantified then it can be added, and if it can be added then the better future is the one in which there is the most happiness.

But is happiness a quantity that can be added? And is the best life the one in which there is the greatest happiness? The first question is not easy to answer, but the second seems to be straightforward: of course a happy life is the best life. If that answer is correct, then the best society is the one in which the most people possible live happy lives. However obviously true that answer might seem, I think that it has problems. If we think about the substance of good lives differently we will get a different answer to the practical questions of what we ought to do in the present to ensure the best possible conditions of life for future generations. I think MacAskill is correct to argue that we owe future generations a world that will satisfy the social and natural conditions of their being able to live good lives, but I differ on the substance of good lives and whether the most important philosophical problem is finding a way to quantify different possible futures.

The problem begins with the assumption that we can meaningfully quantify good lives by assigning some numerical value to "happiness." I agree that there are some objective features of good lives (without resources that satisfy our natural and social needs we cannot live, and if we cannot live, we cannot live well). However, good lives are *lived* from the inside; they are active experiences, not things to which a determinate numerical value can be assigned. The reason why it is either wrong or tragic to sacrifice one life for another life is that every life is an unrepeatable singularity which, once gone, can never be repeated or recreated.

MacAskill is sensitive to objections to populations ethics that take the form of: if all that matters is the long term in which trillions of potential people could come into being, then if it were the case that sacrificing a billion people now would allow an extra ten trillion people to live in the future, the correct decision would be to liquidate the one billion people. The problem is obvious: this approach takes into account the interests of the future people, but completely ignores the interests of the one billion actually living people. MacAskill does not argue that we can ignore the interests of actually existing people, but rather that we should build into our deliberations the interests of the future people who will inherit the consequences of our decisions. The goal is expanded inclusivity of interests, not sacrifice of the present to the future. "I'm not claiming that the interests of present and future people should always and everywhere be given equal weight. I'm just claiming that future people matter significantly. Just as caring more about our children

doesn't mean ignoring the interests of strangers, caring about our contemporaries doesn't mean ignoring the interests of our descendants." (11)

But what are people's interests? Here MacAskill's predilection for trying to assign quantitative weights to "happiness" causes him to argue as if people's interests can be determined by Oxford professors quite independently of their own experiences and subjective feelings. The truth of the matter is that one often mistakes difficult lives for lives that are not worth living, but if one were to ask the person who lives the difficult life, they very much prefer to be alive, but with the challenge that they face solved. For centuries disabled people were judged to be unfit for life and locked away in institutions, hidden from public view, or, when seen in public, pitied. No one asked them how they felt or what they needed; 'experts' concluded from an observer's perspective that their lives were without value. In the twentieth century, disabled people organized against their medicalized incarceration and successfully demonstrated that the problems that they faced were not functions of their disability but the organization of a society which failed to make necessary accommodations. The point is that there was a great gulf between what people thought disabled people thought about the value of their own lives and what they themselves thought. This difference entailed radically different approaches to the way social resources were invested.

MacAskill's argument runs the risk of committing this sort of error. Consider his discussion of Derek Parfit's 'repugnant conclusion.' (179-184) The conclusion that so troubled Parfit is that on one version of utilitarian reasoning it seems better to prefer a future in which almost everyone enjoys a bad life but not so bad that they would prefer death to one in which there is a much smaller number of people that enjoy a good life. If you do the math the sum of happiness will be greater in the first future in which a huge number of people have mostly miserable lives to one where a small number of people have excellent lives. Let us keep the math simple: a society with 10 people with each person enjoying a happiness of value 1 gives that society a total happiness of 10. A society of a million people with happiness 0.1 adds up to a total happiness of 100 000. Hence the repugnant conclusion.

As it turns out, MacAskill is not as repulsed by the repugnant conclusion as Parfit but that is not what concerns me. I am also not skeptical that there are ways of determining better and worse societies. What does concern me is the way the false concreteness of this way of arguing (numbers and charts and equations lend an air of scientificity to it) lead to hopelessly abstract conclusions (nothing real is said about what constitutes the happiness and misery of these future societies. All the work is done from the outside and on high: the philosopher imagines and policy is supposed to follow. But if one aspect of a good society is that it satisfies the conditions for its members to live as free, self-determining agents, then their voices would always have to be included in any evaluation of the goodness or otherwise of that society. The example of the assumptions most people made about the quality of disabled people's lives should give everyone pause about the attempt to work out the "expected values" of different possible futures independently of the self-interpretation of the people who will live those lives (37).

Again, my point is not to reject the existence of objective criteria of social evaluation. My point is that those objective criteria are only meaningful in light of the real lives that they make possible. Thus, charts and graphs that pretend to a mathematical rigour that ethical arguments

cannot attain distract from the real issue of the ethics of quality of lives: are social and natural resources being utilized to ensure that everyone has access to the full range of the goods they need to satisfy their needs and develop their life-capacities, or are they appropriated by a minority ruling class to satisfy their own short term interests in wealth accumulation? If we had a society in which resources were sustainably produced and distributed according to the needs of each and every person, then everyone would be in a position to fashion their lives in their own way, contributing and appropriating in a virtuous circle that could continue so long as there was energy and resources to appropriate.

Human lives are not fungible quantities. The value of life is the qualitative richness of the experiences and activities each person is able to enjoy over the course of a life time. Rather than search for ways to tally up expected values, we should start from the principle that each life is an unrepeatable singularity and the main social task to organize our societies such that our economic systems are able to satisfy each and every person's fundamental natural and socio-cultural needs sustainably, over an open-ended future. Attaining that goal also demands that people reflect philosophically on what they really need as opposed to what they are conditioned to want.

Of course, achieving this goal is much, much, much more easily said than done and I am not suggesting that social policy can be reduced to these easy platitudes. But the platitude does point us in a different direction than MacAskill's thought experiments and attempts to work out expected values. Instead of trying to quantify, we should instead focus on concrete social problems,— the actual threats to life and the future— and try to solve them. MacAskill also focuses on those problems (some of which— nuclear war, climate change— we should take more seriously than others- the possibility of a malevolent superintelligent AI). He supports movement building and institutional change, but he also urges readers to give support to charities. "Whatever else you do in life, donations re one way to do an enormous amount of social good" (233). Really? I think that MacAskill needed to consider the ways in which charity both disables people as political agents and unburdens governments from the task of taxing wealth appropriately and using the revenues to invest in need-satisfying public goods and institutions.

Just as in case of reasoning about better and worse futures, on the question of social change MacAskill also has a tendency for top down reasoning. He rightly argues that values matter in political struggle and that one of the key dangers is 'value lock in' (92-102) of an authoritarian system, but he tends to see the leading role in social change played by intellectuals. He thus celebrates the work of Quaker abolitionists in the struggle against the slave trade, but says nothing of the San Domingue revolution (1793) in which enslaved human beings overthrew slavery in what is today Haiti, or the rebellion in 1830's Jamaica which catalyzed the anti-slavery movement in England (62-70).

Political differences aside, I agree with the deeper point that MacAskill makes. We are a species whose existence is distributed in time; history is as a continuum that extends back before we were born (we owe our existence to past choices) and can extend into an open-ended future if we make wise choices right now. When we think of our lives in this way we can escape the confines of an egocentric conception of our own good and reflect upon implications our current form of life will have for the future people we are actively producing right now. We do not need to

sacrifice ourselves for others who might exist at absurdly distant points in time. What we do need to do is to transform our ruling value-system and major social institutions so that we can ensure, as far as possible, that future generations will be able to produce and appropriate the goods they need to live full and free lives rich in meaningful and enjoyable experiences and activities.

Will those people be “happy?” One might think that the answer would be self-evidently “yes” but I think that question is too narrow. “Happiness” (however one might define it) is only one dimension of a valuable life. Challenges, struggles, and growing pains are also goods in human life. Moreover, people are differently disposed towards the experiences and activities of their lives. “Unsettled souls prefer unhappiness,” said the great American philosopher George Santayana. Would there be great art without melancholic people who feel deeply the pain of loss? I doubt it. Valuable lives should indeed contain moments of enjoyment, but a life of pure bliss is neither (I would argue) possible nor desirable. In any case, people’s feelings are their own. Our job is not to decide how people will feel in a trillion years, but to make sure that there is breathable air and a habitable planet in the next second, and the next second after that, and soon on, if not *ad infinitum*, then for as long as possible.

## Readings: Lucien Freud: New Perspectives, National Gallery, London

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I am not sure what new perspective this exhibition (which I saw while in London last week), takes with regard to Freud's work. There were no rarities uncovered or novel curatorial or art historical insights shared. The cynic in me says that the epithet "new" was meant to entice those already familiar with Freud's work to part with 24(!) pounds to see the show in the expectation that they would find something novel that they had not seen or thought before. The chronological arrangement of the paintings did allow the viewer to see Freud's (quite stunning) development as a painter, but chronological presentation is not exactly path-breaking.

Like every gallery that I visit these days, the curatorial notes are chock-a-block with warnings about "context" and gender representation and whatever else from the past that might offend the thoughtless. Setting all that boilerplate nonsense aside and looking at the paintings from mid-career onwards, it is a true shame that the show is priced out of reach of working people, because Freud is arguably the late twentieth and early twenty-first century's master of *paint* as a medium to evoke the dignity with which human beings bear the challenge of time. One can see traces of the influence of his friend Francis Bacon in his work, but Bacon applied paint much more thinly. Bacon's twisted agonized faces speak to the turmoil within; Freud's luscious and generous layerings of paint almost become flesh: generous, corpulent, blotchy, bulbous, round, rich, a liquid flesh that registers the marks of time on the body.

It is a good thing for art history that I am a philosopher and not an art dealer or critic. I must confess that I did not see whatever dealers and curators saw in his early works that caused them to champion him. To me, these early portraits and self-portraits are clumsy in the way they stretch and exaggerate eyes, noses, and hands. I do not see anything remarkable in their composition or their handling of paint: certainly nothing formal that would indicate the dramatic developments to come. So much for my eye for talent.

The through line in Freud's work is of course his almost exclusive focus on portraiture. But that which would mark Freud as almost single-handedly responsible for the aesthetic renewal of classical portraiture in the mid twentieth century— the scrupulous honesty about the effects of time on the human body conveyed through novel forms of applying, layering, smearing, and pimping of paint— is absent from the student and early works. Not only is it absent, the early portraits are almost the opposite of the later. While certain features are emphasized through distortion, the early paintings have a cleaner, idealizing, more sculptural appearance than the remarkable figures that began to appear from the 1960's and continued to develop until his death in 2011. If the early works mildly idealized the human form, the mid-career to the last works emphasize its reality.

There is a liquid quality to bodies that Freud captures like no other painter. Fat pools, flesh wrinkles and sags, faces get creased, skin gets discoloured. There is an overwhelming sense of aging as the prime shaper of bodies. Even children and adolescents look old in his renditions.

While Freud forces us to look at the corpulent, the wrinkled, the distended, his works are not grotesque, although many people respond to them as if they were. One of the most famous pieces in this show is his tiny, perfect portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. As I was examining it, a German woman remarked to the man that she was with that it was not a very kind portrait of the Queen. I thought that kindness has nothing to do with portraiture. The best portrait is honest. Freud had the courage not to flatter but portray Elizabeth as she was: an aging woman with all the sags and wrinkles that shape the faces of real aging women (and men) everywhere.

Above all, what comes through Freud's portraits, whether of his daughters, working class models, or barons and royalty is the quiet dignity of human beings bearing the weight of time. Although it will be as a master of paint, of making paint into a plastic medium, that Freud will be rightly remembered, the best example of his way of evoking this quiet dignity is a small pencil sketch of his mother, dead in her London hospital bed. It is only a few inches by a few inches, made at her bedside after Freud attained special dispensation from the hospital to draw it. It was an act of reconciliation and respect for his mother, but it also confronts us with the serene beauty of a face content at the conclusion of its journey before it has returned to the earth.



## Lessons From History XV: John Donne: That A Wise Man is Known By Much Laughter

Originally posted 21 July, 2022

If laughter is the best medicine, is a serious attitude to life the disease? But if the world's problems demand a serious commitment to their solution, isn't laughter a sign of ignorance, not wisdom? Donne's reflection, one of a series of short essays on practical "paradoxes and problems" that he wrote, does not set out to answer this exact question, but, if we think along with the general direction of his musings, I think we will arrive at a destination that has much significance in these oh so troubled times. As with Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, to which Donne refers, there is much irony in his essay, but that irony communicates much earthly wisdom.

Aristotle defined human beings as "rational animals," and elsewhere as "political animals," but Donne notes that we are equally well defined as laughing animals (who, unlike hyenas, make and get the jokes). "The powers of discourse, and Reason, and laughter, be equally proper unto Man only, why shall not he be only most wise, which hath the most use of laughing?" Donne does not go deeply into the philosophical reasons that might support this argument, but the key point is that wisdom is a form of discrimination and discernment: the wise person knows how to relate to different sorts of situations, many of which call for laughter. Hence the person who does not know how to laugh does not know how to discern the differences between situations. Because they cannot understand those differences, they fail to act in the appropriate way called for by different contexts of action.

Laughter thus expresses *human* wisdom. Donne defines human beings, not God, as laughing animals. It is hard to imagine God laughing, because God's discernment and power are unlimited. Laughter is a response to situations in which we are not fully in control of the outcome. Hence the more clearly we understand our limitations, the more we laugh. God has organized nature such that there are innumerable occasions for laughter, because there are innumerable occasions where the wise response is to give ourselves over to the moment. "Nature saw this faculty to be so necessary in man, that she hath been content that by more causes we should be importuned to laugh than to the exercise of any other power; for things in themselves utterly contrary, beget this effect; for we laugh at both witty and absurd things." Laughter can thus be caused by human action (wit) and the structure of the universe from the point of view of a mortal being with limited powers (absurdity). I want to push Donne's reflections on the latter a little further than he could have gone himself.

The paradox for Donne seems to be that laughter was typically held suspect by philosophy because it appears to be the opposite of the sober calculations of reason. Laughter erupts spontaneously and leads only to more laughter; reason calmly considers the situation and what must be done to rectify or respond to the demands it places upon the agent. Donne suggests, nevertheless, as I noted above, that laughter is in fact the product of a very human capacity to discriminate between different contexts. But I think that Donne's defining humanity in terms of

the ability to laugh as well as think implies much more than Donne explicates about the goods of mortal life on earth.

Donne would surely disagree, but looking at our existence from the standpoint of what we experience and know, we are born and we die and there is no reason to expect that any form of transcendent conscious existence will follow. There is serious business to transact on earth to be sure, but really, if you only have a few decades to ‘strut and fret our hour upon the stage,’ we must keep all that business in perspective. We are all going under come what may, so a uniformly serious disposition towards life undermines the possibility for enjoyment while we are here. No matter how hard we strive, individually or collectively, life will be beset by problems. We can curse our fate, burn up every moment struggling and striving to build heaven on earth, or we can, with Democritus, laugh.

Democritus laughed because he understood the contingency and cosmic purposelessness of life. Our existence is the product of the random collision of atoms in the void. Yet accidental as our existence is, it is a happy accident because we are alive, aware, capable of understanding, action, and enjoyment. Enjoyment depends not on fleeing from the consequences of materialism (we are born, we die, and there is nothing afterwards) but by fully embracing them. If things are, as he argued, “by convention sweet, by convention sour, but in truth atoms and void,” then what else are we to do but laugh at ourselves and our world? Isn’t that better than killing each other over whether the candy is really sweet or really sour? It is both. It is neither. Who cares?

Materialism of a Democritean sort is usually thought of as nihilistic because it dispenses with God as both the creator and legislator of the universe. Certainly the Donne who preached at St. Paul’s would have recoiled from Democritus’s central teaching. And yet, his understanding of the wisdom of laughter is perhaps another layer of paradox that, given his religious convictions, he could not explore. Life is only enjoyable to the extent that it ends. We should not despair that the universe is mere atoms and void but rejoice that some subset of those atoms has coalesced into us. There was no providential wisdom steering the storm of particles; we equally well could not have been. Yet, here we are, alive and open to the spectacle of the universe. What else could one do but laugh at this impossible good fortune?

The wisdom of laughter is born of metaphysical discernment, understanding our place in the whole. Proper understanding of our place in the whole *frees* us to laugh. There is a time for careful investigation and microanalysis, but if we apply that to every moment of life we will squander the short time we have to enjoy ourselves. The person who puzzles all night over the meaning of every word in the joke doesn’t “get it.” Woe to the zealots who cannot free themselves from subservience to the literal, for they shall inherit the kingdom of boredom. The man who laughs much is wise because he knows the difference between what and whom to take seriously and what and at whom to laugh.

Fools are those who make themselves ridiculous because they try to reduce the whole of life to a consistent conceptual schema of explanation. The wise man does not demand uniform consistency; there are pockets of difference that call for responses appropriate to the demands that they make. There is nothing more humorous than the dogmatist who wants to squeeze

everything into one box. As they try to stuff one more thing in, ten others fall out from every side.

The serious person will respond: there is no time to laugh, problems must be solved. But is not the main problem of life how to enjoy it? If so, then there is always time to laugh. The person who refuses to allow themselves (and others) this respite is more concerned with their own ego than with the world. *They want to be seen as the type of person who truly cares.* But their uncompromising earnestness, were it ever to form the basis of a world, would smother all enjoyment of life. If laughter is a paradoxical sign of wisdom, then, from the other direction, unbending severity of mood is a sign of foolishness.

Laughter erupts when we let go of attachment to our ego. When we laugh, we forget ourselves; our ego dissolves in the uncontrollable convulsions of our chest. As Stephen Pender, quoting Juan Vives, notes in his history of the “moral physiology” of laughter, it is ““an external action proceeding from within [*sed actio exterior ab interiore manans*] and caused by joy and pleasure.’ Joy and pleasure expand the heart, which in turn causes ‘the broadening of the face, particularly around the mouth, in a gesture called a grin, which precedes laughter’” (The Moral Physiology of Laughter). The person who cannot laugh has thus walled themselves off from the external causes of joy and pleasure.

There are also external causes of misery and suffering, and wise people must attend to them too. Yet misery and suffering are almost never so severe that the sufferers cannot laugh. It is usually the spectators, the one’s who want to be known as people who really care, that spend their days weeping (at least in public) while those who organize themselves to change external circumstances laugh as they struggle. Humour (like music) is also political weapon. The laughter of the oppressed exposes the absurdities of ideologies of superiority and inferiority, the abject stupidity of purportedly scientific naturalized hierarchies. Laughter is the friend of all oppressed groups. Some of the best comedy emerges from the most difficult circumstances because it is a function of the human ability to rise above and a commitment to living in peace and freedom. In truth, we are all the same, atoms and void condensed into sentient clusters that can laugh together.

Hence laughter is proof of our social individuality. It is true that one can laugh alone, but laughter shared is more fulsome and sustained—laughter is contagious. The ability to laugh is the virtue of social individuals oriented to each other’s happiness and well-being. Laughter is covalent social bond binding me to you and you to me. But in binding it does not imprison. On the contrary, it frees us from the prisons of anger and pity. The wise man does not get angry with others nor does he feel sorry for them: “And if one these hot cholerick firebrands, which nourish themselves by quarrelling, and kindling others, spit upon a fool one spark of disgrace, he, like a thatcht house quickly burning may be angry; but the wise man, as cold as a Salamander, may not only not be angry with him, but not be sorry for him; therefore, let him laugh; so he shall be known a man.”

Donne ends his paradoxical reflection by noting their ironic undoing: if his conclusions are true, then anyone who understands them will also have to laugh at their insignificance. All the books of earthly wisdom will reduce to dust one day, but that does not mean that their conclusions are

untrue. They teach that life is worth living to the extent that we do our duty free from guilt. Our duty is precisely to contribute to the solution of the problems that stand in the way of more universal enjoyment. It is never wrong to laugh, therefore, because laughter *is* a solution, a temporary escape from and rising above whatever weighs us down.

Emma Goldman said that she did not want to be part of any revolution that would stop her from dancing. I don't want to be a part of any revolution that would stop me from laughing. Laughter transports us, even if one for a moment, to the world we should want to live in, where we get along with others and together enjoy the unfolding of the universe before us.