

## THE GOOD FOR HUMAN BEINGS

The PB Boulangerie is becoming popular. As early as 8 o'clock in the morning, the line of people waiting to buy bread, pastries, or coffee stretches out the door all the way into the parking lot.

The place opens at 7:00, which is when I got there yesterday hoping to beat the crowd. I was supposed to meet G.A. and we both arrived at the same time. We bought our coffee and a loaf of raisin-and-nut bread, found a table on the patio, and installed ourselves.

The coffee was excellent and the bread, still warm, heavenly.

“As I told you on the phone, I finally got around to reading your piece about the Socratic Paradox,” she said. “It has been a busy summer.”

“Same here. But thanks for taking the trouble.”

Roughly three of weeks ago, I asked G.A. to read my essay. I value her opinion. When I didn't hear from her, I concluded that she probably disliked what I wrote and wanted to avoid having to tell me that. But then she called last Friday to propose that we meet for coffee and a talk.

“No trouble at all,” she replied. “I enjoyed reading it, especially Part IV. I thought that was pretty good -- a bit long perhaps, but interesting all the same. In fact, I read it several times.”

“So what else didn't you like about it?” I asked.

“Well, I think I disagree with you,” she said.

“About the Socratic Paradox?”

“No, I have no opinion about that. I don't really know enough about the subject.”

“About what then?”

“About the good being mysterious,” she replied. “It is not the good that is mysterious to us. It is the good *for human beings*. And it is that because we remain largely mysterious to ourselves.”

“I don’t think I would quarrel with that,” I said. “But go on.”

“You keep saying that we are beings who strive, builders and makers, and so on. Fine. But we strive above all to survive and to thrive. The purpose of all that building and making is to take care of ourselves and of our kind. Unfortunately, we don’t know all that much about our kind, not enough, at any rate, to have a clear and reliable sense of what that means.

“I know that sounds absurd, but all one needs to do is look at parenting, for example, and notice how often it seems to happen that apparently good people with the best intentions raise children who are confused about themselves or, worse, already broken before their lives really get underway. Those parents care alright, but they don’t seem to know what they are doing. But what’s to know except what sort of beings they are dealing with in their children? You can’t take proper care of a being that you don’t understand.

“We are not necessarily in much better shape collectively. We make mistakes all the time that we only recognize as mistakes in retrospect, and then only because the unfortunate outcome is staring us in the face. In the last fifty or sixty years, for example, we have virtually destroyed the American public education system, which used to be fairly good. It all happened with the best intentions, but good intentions are no substitute for knowledge. We now get all this daily handwringing about the state of American education and how to fix the problem. The reality is that we didn’t know what we were doing, and still don’t know, mostly because we are in perpetual fog about ourselves and our kind, and therefore also about what taking proper care involves.

“I don’t mean to suggest that I am an exception to that generalization. I don’t know any better than anyone else. Nor am I suggesting that this a peculiarly American problem. It’s a general human problem for which there are no magic remedies, and it is as old as the human race. We are opaque to ourselves.”

“I still don’t disagree,” I said.

“Oh, but I think you do,” she replied, “at least when I read your essay. You sound as though you believe that the problem has a solution. You call it ‘apt spontaneity’. You concede that achieving that may be difficult, but you consider the feat possible, apparently in the form of some Zen-like letting-oneself-be the discovery of which you attribute to Socrates. For all I know, you may be right about Socrates, but in that case I think you’re both wrong. I just don’t buy that there can come a moment in a person’s life where her grasp of what you call ‘the good’ somehow cancels out the effects of self-ignorance. For each of us, that ignorance, however, is the principal cause of our failures and always has been. I therefore don’t see the point of talk about apt spontaneity. How could it be apt if someone possessing it continues to make mistakes?”

“It all depends on what you call ‘mistakes’. A practical mistake may not be a moral mistake. Apt spontaneity is not the same thing as omniscience. Nor is the knowledge of the good.”

“Come now!” she said. “Of what use is the good that does not include the good for human beings? Of what use is any knowledge of the good that is not also a knowledge of the good for human beings? What difference does any well-formedness out there make to anyone if human beings bring themselves to grief? Do you find comfort in the idea that no matter how catastrophic a mess we make, it’s all okay provided that we are morally right? Forgive my saying so, but that reminds me of a drivers’ education message about a guy who drives through an intersection and gets hit by a truck running the red light. Our guy had the green light. Unfortunately he’s now dead, but all the same, the light was green.”

“You are really in high gear about this, aren’t you?”

“I want everything you want,” she replied. “A better, more humane world, less heartlessness and thoughtlessness, less political corruption and economic injustice, but I think that there is not the slightest chance of our ever getting there as long as we continue deluding ourselves about the nature of the real problem.”

“And you think that’s what I’m doing?”

“Up to a point, yes.”

“Because I don’t believe that knowing the good is the same thing as being omniscient?”

“No, because you think that there are discoverable principles of conduct that can somehow make up for the fact that we are not. Admittedly, you have culture on your side in that conviction, but I would say that if there is anything wrong with culture, it is that, namely the tendency to see or to seek eternal truths in what are only practical rules of thumb.”

“You are going to have to explain that to me,” I said.

“Take this business about restraint, detachment, thoughtfulness, and so on, that you like to bring up. You usually go on to say that there are limits to the value of restraint. Some situations call not for thoughtfulness but for action, not for detachment but for uninhibited engagement. Sometimes you say that the upshot of all that is that while restraint has its place, so does a measure of restraint in the practice of restraint. At other times, you say that temperance and courage, though apparently opposites, are merely two faces of the same thing, namely apt spontaneity, and that the real challenge is to figure out what aptness consists of in these contexts. And from there, we are usually off looking for the good and talking about knowledge of the good.

“In other words, we are looking for some principle, some standard that is implicitly invoked in all these cases, whether to find fault with someone who lacks restraint or with someone who practices it to excess. And presumably, in one way or another, that same standard finds expression in the behavior of someone whose spontaneity is apt – someone who practices restraint when he should but not when he shouldn’t.

“I happen to think that no such standard exists, at least not in the positive form that we are looking for. We just think that it *must* exist. Perhaps the thing has to do with some sort of ideal balance between impulse and inhibition. That sounds good, but try to spell it out as a non-trivial principle and it evaporates. Some situations do not call for balance at all. Some call categorically for restraint and others categorically for the opposite. So what does talk about balance do for us?

“It seems to me that recommending balance is a way of ruling out, as inappropriate, an exclusive focus in all situations on the larger context at the expense of the moment, and, as equally inappropriate, *always* privileging the

moment and the here and now at the expense of the larger context. We can expand this characterization in a number of ways. It is not always appropriate to think instead of acting, or to act instead of thinking. Neither is it always appropriate to be alert to the possibly negative consequences of one's behavior, nor, obviously, always appropriate to just go with one's impulses irrespective of possible consequences. Etc. But when all is said and done, what have we got that is not trivial as a positive principle? Don't always do this but also avoid always doing that other thing? Okay, but should I do and when and why?

“You seem to think that there is an answer to that question, hidden somehow between the lines, such as that one should always do the good. But what is *that*?

“For a long time now, you have argued that the good has to do with fit, and fit with the integrity or well-formedness of the larger context. Then, in your most recent essay, you think that you have to concede that that isn't always so. There are situations you say – passionate love may be one of them – in which the larger context has no legitimate claim to my attention. That sounds like saying that in some situations the good has no legitimate claim to my attention. I guess, sometimes the right thing to do is not to worry about what might be the right thing to do. You don't say that. You say instead that the good is mysterious, but that's okay because, possibly, we can have some sort of immediate Zen-like intuition of it that becomes more reliable the more we cultivate our receptivity to it.

“Were I into this kind of theorizing, I would have said that the larger context always includes the human condition, unacknowledged, but like an elephant in the room. It does not need a legitimate claim to my attention in order to receive it. It is part of the framework of attention. It is not the good that is mysterious because sometimes it has nothing to do with the integrity of the larger context. It is we, and the good for us, that are mysterious, and we are always a troubling part of the context.

“As you can see, I am not much good at theorizing,” she laughed.

“You're doing just fine,” I said, “but you haven't told me why, in your mind, the fact that it is hard to pin down a positive principle translates into the contention that there are no such principles.”

“Just look at restraint,” she replied. “What is all that talk about? It’s about the plain fact that we are passionate beings, that we often get carried away, sometimes with catastrophic consequences. Therefore, because we care about ourselves, we have a huge interest in limiting the sway of passion. Attending to that interest takes the form of cultural recommendations and injunctions that broadly fall under the heading of the morality of restraint. Think! Learn to see the danger coming! Inhibit your engagement! Consider the consequences, the larger context, the well-being of your family and community! Sure she is attractive, but she is your neighbor’s wife! You’ll make a mess of your life and hers if you don’t put the brakes on. Now, before it’s too late!

“And that doesn’t just apply to errant sexual passions. We are constantly at risk of engagements that cause us to become oblivious to things that also matter, or that should, and we end up doing things that we later regret. In the face of that ubiquitous risk, the cultural message is, ‘Be careful, step back regularly, or at least occasionally, and think about what you are doing. Don’t rush into things that you cannot easily get out of. If you are not careful, you will almost certainly make a mess both of your own life and probably of other people’s.’ There is nothing complicated or deeply philosophical here. It’s all obvious practical good sense in the form of broad generalities, of rules of thumb, if you will.

“At the same time, we also know that without passion nothing gets done and nothing worthwhile accomplished, that risks must be taken, that detachment and thinking are not risk-free, and that doing nothing is also doing something. Moreover, we know about ourselves that a life lived dispassionately is of no interest to us, that we need and want to feel, intensely if possible, that we need to love people and things in order for us to remain the beings we are and have lives worth living. We have an interest, in other words, on putting the brakes on the sway of restraint and on the morality of restraint.

“Attending to that interest translates into a set of opposite cultural injunctions. ‘Don’t think all the time: act. Let yourself go with your impulses. Get on with it! Seize the day! Live! Show some courage! Of course love is a risky business, but a loveless life is not worth the candle! By all means, be careful, but don’t be stupid about it.’ It’s all generalities and practical rules of thumb.

“It is culture talking to each us and striving to inculcate what understanding it possesses about the beings we are, and about what we are up against.”

“That understanding sounds like a sort of collective self-knowledge,” I said. “So what’s mysterious to us about ourselves?”

“Quite a bit,” she replied. “It is not a mystery that we are passionate beings, nor, speaking generally, that passion, even as it drives our accomplishments and makes our lives worth living, endlessly lands us in trouble. But what remains a very large mystery to us is how all that works and, more importantly, how to arrange things, how to go about them, in a way that does justice to our nature without bringing us to grief. That *is* the good for human beings. It may not be mysterious as a verbal generality, but it sure is in practice, when it comes to life as lived.

“It is all very well to know, for example, that people who care about their marriages avoid having extramarital affairs. Who doesn’t know that as a generality? It is quite another thing to recognize one’s own situation as a case in point. Caught up in it, it can seem obvious that one’s own case is different. One is not just having a trivial extramarital affair: one has miraculously run into the love of one’s life. One could be deluding oneself, but one could also be right. So what do you do?

“The culture tells you that sensible people don’t get themselves into that kind of situation in the first place, or that if they up there anyhow, they will conclude that it makes no difference whether they are right in thinking that they have run into the love of their lives. They settled that issue when they got married, committing themselves to the proposition that their spouses were the loves of their lives. End of story.

“But it isn’t necessarily the end of the story, is it? At least not in real life. You may have committed yourself, but that now feels like a mistake. It now seems to you that you didn’t know what you were doing at the time. You may be right about that, too, just as you may be wrong in thinking that you know what you are doing now. In any case, you are up against it. You can drop the affair and get on with your life, hoping that your now alienated spouse will not choose to leave you instead. Or you can divorce your spouse, hoping that your new relationship has a better future than the one you are abandoning. You could end up losing either way. And there isn’t anything

that culture can do for you, or has done for you, beyond recommending that you avoid getting yourself into such situations.

“One might conclude that one way of avoiding such problems altogether is to avoid marriage and remain single. Nonsense, right?”

“Right. It doesn’t address the issue. There are commitments one makes to other people that do not involve actual marriage. And if the solution is to avoid emotional involvements with other human beings, one could end up discovering that to be a mistake as well. Is that what you mean?”

“It is. And the question is what principle, or knowledge, for that matter, anyone could possibly come up with that, faithfully applied in the face of these concrete practical problems, would consistently enable one to come out ahead. It is a serious question because we are not just talking about the trouble individuals get themselves into in their personal relations. We could just as easily talk about people choosing the wrong career, becoming doctors, for example, because that’s what their parents did, or because it seems like a heroic profession. Unfortunately, it turns out not to be the right one for them. More importantly, what is true of us as individuals in these respects, is also true of us collectively.

“A moment ago, we spoke of culture handing out marital advice. But monogamous heterosexual marriage is an institution that we have collectively put into place, thinking of it as an optimal way of dealing with love and procreation. We could be wrong about that. Or perhaps we were right at the time but will turn out to have been wrong over the long haul. If it does, by the time we figure it out, all the problems and all the grief the institution causes in the lives of individuals will be water under the bridge. So, of course, will all the good that has come of it. But were there some positive principle here, one would think that we would have discovered it by now and institutionalized it instead, so that we could have had all the good that has come out of the institution of marriage without all the headaches and the grief it has caused.

“In other words, it seems to me that, just like our individual lives are involuntary experiments in taking care of ourselves, so is culture as a whole. In both cases, the results are uncertain. We can look to our culture for guidance and try to live by its advice, but when all is said and done, it is in

no better position to hand out advice than each of us is individually, assuming we are not children who have yet to learn how the world works.”

“I’ll grant you that general talk about the good serves a purpose. In attending to ourselves and our kind, it is useful to know how nature works when it seems to work well. For one thing, we are part of nature; for another, we depend on it. When nature seems to work well, it presents itself as a system in which all the parts work together. To use your language, there is fit and integrity. The human body is such a system, for example, and we are ahead by knowing that, since knowing it is the foundation of scientific medicine. Similarly, having an adequate sense of fit helps in the making of art and in its appreciation. And speaking generally, in our building and in our thinking, striving for systemic integrity trumps relying on magic for success.

“But human beings are unique in nature. There is nothing like us out there and we are largely opaque to ourselves. For each of us, our acquaintance with what it is to be human is interior and semi-private. There is no public theory to take the uncertainty out of that privacy and to understand ourselves with a clarity that would help reduce our vulnerability.

“I am not even talking about something necessarily grand. Why does it take half a life-time for someone to figure out what he or she seeks in love and in life with another, and what that other seeks? Why are three or four failed marriages required before the obvious becomes obvious?

“Well, because we are the beings we are! But we could understand ourselves just a little better. A good theory would help. Meanwhile, however, the good for human beings is discoverable only by living, not by theorizing about the good.”

“Let’s suppose that you are right,” I said. “What would you have us do that we are not doing now?”

“We could be up front about it,” she replied, “instead of constantly pretending that we have it straight, or that our culture does. We get on the case of individuals whose behavior is at odds with the prescriptions of our culture, as though it were obvious that culture has it right. In reality, any culture is merely a would be clearing in the wilderness, about which it remains to be seen whether it is real. Moreover, culture likes to forget – as do we all -- that even a clearing in the wilderness is part of the wilderness.

“We could acknowledge that the human race is a question mark and the precise nature of its good yet to be figured out. If we did, we might be somewhat slower to resort to killing each other in the name of purportedly indubitable principles, or to mistreat each other, confident that we are going to get away with it. If we squarely faced what we are up against, both individually and collectively, we might make it our business to take some of the edge off the problem, if nothing else, by being kinder to each other, especially to the less fortunate among us.”

“Haven’t you just talked yourself into a problem?” I said. “What does one do when one doesn’t know what to do? What is the good for human beings when they don’t know what it is? Isn’t it what you just said, namely to face that fact squarely and to get on with it, to make efforts to solve the problem, or at least to take the edge off of it? What is it that tells us all that, if it isn’t the knowledge of the good? Doesn’t that show that this knowledge may be more useful, and less trivial, than you are willing to concede? Where is the delusion?”

“It lies in the thought that saying these things is to utter eternal truths the possession of which is almost as good as solving the actual human problem,” she replied. “What does one do with a problem? One solves it, what else! Yes, that’s a kind of wisdom about the meaning of words, but it is not the same thing as possessing an actual solution.”

“Moreover, the answer to the question, ‘What does one do when one does not know what to do?, depends on the context, such as how hard up one happens to be. If one is really hard up, the answer is not theory and careful thought. It is surviving, which, as you are fond of pointing out, may require a significant shrinking of the logical horizon of one’s awareness.’”

“So, I guess if I hear you right, the question is, ‘Just how hard up are we collectively?’”

“If you ask me, we’re pretty hard up,” she said. “That usually brings out the savage best in us in the Cro-Magnon sense, but also makes for a situation where we are most at risk of making serious mistakes.”

(to be continued)

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