Irony and the Social Good

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IRONY AND THE SOCIAL GOOD

Beset by radical and persistent doubts, "the ironist . . . [worries] about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe [or] taught to play the wrong language game."

—Richard Rorty

If only we could urge students: “Study liberal arts—especially the Western canon—and discover the meaning of the social good.” True, the finest minds—the authors of the Great Books—prescribe the collective good. Let me understate the case: Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately?—there’s no consensus. Indeed, what obdurate insight comes from centuries of filigreed reflection if no consensus emerges? Could it be there’s been no progress in delineating the social good? Is it all an imaginative footnote to Plato? My paper corroborates this assertion—no difficulty here. But here’s what’s decidedly problematic: How shall we respond to the absence of consensus regarding the nature of the social good?

I

Cumulative progress in the physical sciences stands in marked contrast to footnoting Plato. Indeed, those of us in the liberal arts aren’t sure what progress would look like, and we certainly don’t agree upon the nature of the social good. By way of contrast, scientific progress is informed by ever-more synoptic theories expanding the prediction and control of nature. Unfortunately, particle logic reveals nothing regarding the social good.

Perhaps that ever-elusive progress would look like this: Discovering—or devising—the holy grail of discourse—what Rorty calls a “final vocabulary: the last word, universally self-evident – not culture-dependent. In effect, a first principle from which the particulars of the social good can be derived. The discovery (or invention) of the social good would elicit the same “Ah-ha” experience as learning, say, the Pythagorean Theorem: Awestruck, we’d gasp: “Of course; how could it be otherwise!” More modestly, I suspect most of us would settle for a principle that might harmonize our pluralistic, contentions culture. Even this more modest quest seems quixotic; what then?
Here’s what I have in mind when I assert there’s no consensus in the canon regarding the social good. I am certain of this: I am incapable of proffering an adequate, let alone definitive, account of canonical notions of the social good. However, the glosses hazarded reveal the contested, if not acrimonious, nature of the sectarian and secular canon.

Turning to sectarian visions: indebted—ironically—to the pagans. How much did Nietzsche exaggerate when he quipped that Christianity is Platonism for the masses? [Simply remove the “o” from Plato’s account of the Good in Book VII of the Republic, and we have the Paulian notion of God.] The supernatural Good, or God, is the ultimate reality bestowing life, meaning, and direction to all things. The Abrahamic faiths find this otherworldly metaphysic congenial. But faith in a brave, noumenal world doesn’t legislate singular notions of the social good, even within the same faith.

The bedeviling is in the details. Erich Fromm divides religion into the legalistic and the humanistic. Legalistic sensibility emphasizes orthodox beliefs, and practices, rituals and litanies practiced religiously—of course. Humanistic religion emphasizes good works. In the Gospels, James reminds believers that devils tremble with their certain knowledge of God: Surely the Devil knows the score, but he—to understate the case—is unworthy of salvation. And so the dispute continues to this day: Legalists urge that no amount of good works make us worthy in the sight of God; humanists insist upon doing God’s work—whatever that may be. The dispute between legalists and humanists will be settled as soon as NRA members voluntarily abandon their weapons.

There are, of course, internecine conflicts regarding the social good. Legalists disagree regarding requisite practices—fortunately, there’s little enthusiasm for the dictates in Leviticus. And humanists disagree about what constitutes good deeds: For example, should abortion clinics be opened or closed? No wonder there are hundreds of diverse denominations in the United States alone.
Even well established, orthodox faiths such as Catholicism are conflicted. The earliest Christians embraced pacifism in accord with the Sermon on the Mount, and had little enthusiasm for serving in Caesar’s armies to defend the Roman Empire. Following Constantine’s conversion, war became—to mix metaphors—kosher, justified in the defense and expansion of Christian empires. And yet, during the Crusades, even the saints of the Church disagreed about warfare: Some argued that warfare is evil; other determined that just war can be a social good; while other saints celebrated the virtue of holy war—as good as it gets for today’s Islamaphobes. Saint Francis embraced the Beatitudes and became a pacifist after fighting in the Crusades. St. Thomas articulated just war doctrine that reverberates to this day theorists such as Michael Walzer (the keynote speaker here two years ago). An advocate of holy war, St. Bernard was as fanatical as any latter-day jihadist.

Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God: My religious friends tell me that didn’t realize He was even sick. In any case, many turn to secular works to get a handle on the social good. These works—to understate the case—are not in accord. For every Rousseau celebrating the natural man there is a Freud warning that lust for killing is in our blood. Niebuhr offers a telling account of the clash between Enlightenment optimists and pessimists in *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*.

And what is normative theory good for other than presentations at philosophy conferences? (After attending such a conference, my son allowed: “You know, dad, there are terms for collectives such as a parliament of owls; why not a confusion of philosophers?” Shall we, with Kant embrace formal notions of the social good, imperatives never to be violated. (You know the objections to such pure morality.) Or, do we find Mill’s concern with consequences more congenial? (Ah! But who can foretell the future?) Those who argue that the social good must be informed by objective ethical laws dispute the nature and meaning of these laws. (And funny thing: Objectivists believe that *their* ethics, not their opponents’ objective ethics, somehow coincides with the law.) Relativists hold that notions of the social good are bereft of a foundation. With Nietzsche, they believe philosophy is self-confessional. In Rorty’s words:
[Philosophers] not the people to come to if you want confirmation that the things you love with all your heart are central to the structure of the universe . . . . Your sense of moral responsibility is just the result of how you were brought up.²

The prospect that our notion of the social good is derivative from nothing more than our choice of parents spins our moral compass. If we think about all this too deeply we join Nietzsche in staring into the abyss—and the abyss stares back. Existentialists deny a human essence: somehow we must reconcile ourselves to absurdity; somehow—like Sisyphus—we can be happy though meaningless. Camus remained vague on details.

No wonder many philosophers abandon the Big Questions such as the quest for the social good. Given the improbability of getting it right, they make a career of interpreting one another’s interpretations. There’s nothing new about this recognition. Consider Montaigne’s long ago insight:

When were we ever agreed among ourselves: "this book has enough; there is no more to be said about it?" Do we find any end to the need of interpreting? . . . Is it not the common and final end of all studies? Our opinions are grafted upon another; the first serves as a stock to the second to the third, and so forth.³

II

Given—to be charitable—the inconclusive canon, is there nothing the liberal arts can say about the social good? Of what use, then, is the canon? It serves a negative purpose. It warns of mutating a synoptic, canonical vision into a utopian nightmare. Unhappily, there’s ample evidence. It’s facile to mention the perversion of Marxism that became Stalinism, or lush 19th Century German Romanticism transmogrifying in Nazism. Few, however, indict the folly and tragedy of American Exceptionalism—world-class narcissism that contributed to fiascoes in Korean, Indochina, and war without end in the Middle East. Niebuhr’s [Italics added]Irony of American History deserves more attention.
The canon also serves a constructive function—it invites conversation such as this conversation on the liberal arts. In 1945 Karl Popper warned—not always fairly—that certain authors (especially Plato) were progenitors of totalitarianism. True, Plato displays dogmatism. Even so, he displays a rather ironic attitude toward his own ruminations. In Book X of the Republic Plato laments that if his vision ever came to pass it would soon be corrupted by the vicissitudes of mortal existence. Nevertheless, after a robust workout at the gym and a fine dinner, the conversation was enjoyable. Perhaps playful conversation and a good meal—rather than canonical pronouncement—leads to more imaginative, comprehensive notions of the social good. In vino….

Plato’s Apology celebrates conversation about matters philosophical. About to die, Socrates rids the room of family distractions, and presents arguments for immortality, arguments doubted by interlocutors. Socrates acknowledges the doubt but allows he enjoyed conversation with his friends. What else is the canon other than an ongoing conversation, among other things, about collective values? Could it be that an element of the good life involves such inconclusive conversations vivified against the backdrop of our ironic fallibility: The recognition that, had we chosen different parents, we’d be talking differently.

And yes, on occasion, the sectarian canon invites conversation. The Talmud narrates a debate among ancient sages regarding a filigreed point in Jewish law. They beseech God for an answer. Refusing to answer, the Almighty insists that He prefers to witness His children developing their minds.

2 Rorty, 19.
