

On Our World and Some of Its Discontents

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I

We must not lull or deceive ourselves into not believing that our world is not becoming increasingly vicious. That is not so in all places but it is so in most places and increasingly so in many more places. Things go badly, pervasively very badly in some places, but increasingly so in varying degrees across the board. The right is sailing in many parts of the world. The number of beggars is increasing in many places as is the number of homeless and the number living in their cars (if they are lucky enough to have one). This is evident in most places in my neck of the woods, that is in Montreal, though it has many counterparts. My own past is not a strikingly poor past, though it is not of considerable wealth either. And it remains so. So I *personally* do not feel the sting of serious impoverishment. Though it is on my mind a lot. I welcome that my taxes have increased and *hope* they are being put to good purposes and not being put to fancy new fighter planes. Does Canada need them to fight off the USA or Russia or China or ISIS?

However, we should keep in mind that one swallow or one robin does not make a spring or one fine day. But isn't it a fact that our world is becoming increasingly vicious? There are too many snowstorms, too many powerful rainstorms with their resultant flooding, too many wildfires out of control, too many droughts, and more generally too many bad days as far as the wellbeing of human life is concerned. (If this makes me a moralist rather than a critic of moralism, so be it.) Year after year our world is becoming hotter. Some places intolerably so. (Parts of India in 2016, for example.) Not to mention the increasing extent and frequency of out of control wildfires accompanied by

reasonably nearby smaller ones. All the while these things make their extensive contribution to this viciousness along with the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. It is clear enough that Trump-like people are pushing things along toward worsening ways. Accompanied by some of their more civilized counterparts it is clear enough they often don't give a damn about people though they deceptively claim to be their supporters. Trump has in that way conned many people. This is a contemporary counterpart of an old story. Think, for example, of Zola's narratives of some years ago. Remember his novel *Germinal*. And go further back in history. Keep in mind not only the formal change but the substantive change. There once were slaves and it still goes on thought not so fulsomely. Serfs did not have cars to sleep in nor did slaves. They had nothing like that to sleep in. And, if serfs are not enough, thinly veiled slavery still goes on in our supposedly slave-free world. Not only in Indonesia but in London in the United Kingdom as well. Think of who does the car washing in some car washing facilities in London. They are virtual slaves.

To say that the world is becoming more vicious is a hard saying and it is a hard pill to swallow. Many people who are in denial here will not swallow what I have been just asserting. But isn't that unwelcome account a telling it like it is? We must (morally must) take a careful non-evasive look at the world. Do I exaggerate in what I am asserting? I, of course, do not deny there are good people in the world. There clearly are. Where else would they be? In heaven? That this is so is evident and we should be grateful for that being so evident. But having that understanding does not add up to there being a good world or a just world or a world on the way to being just or good. But there is evidence, for what should be obvious, namely that there is *some* good in the world and some bits of justice. But to think our world is good is just a daydream. The badness, if we take it to head and to heart, is overwhelming. Too many of us turn a blind eye to what the gun lobby does in the U.S. and how the U.S. arms industry enables Saudi Arabia to slaughter away in Yemen including women and children and targeting hospitals.

The bits or kernels of goodness or of justice that there plainly are do not at all add up to a good world or a just world or to a world where a moral point of view prevails. It plainly reveals a vicious world. There is indeed a lot of evil in the world and not infrequently pervasively so. We should ask ourselves if something at least approximating a good and just world is just around the corner or if there is much of a probability or any probability that it ever will be so or even that a decent world will obtain. I *might* well be too pessimistic here. Yet it is still at least not unreasonable to struggle to make our world decent or even to make it a little more like something decent or even to make it go in the direction of decency. Surely there is a lot of indecency around. And it needs to be excused if possible. Think of the pervasive hidden slavery that goes on in the world, not just in Indonesia and like places but also in London with its counterparts. There is a declining probability of the world becoming decent with the right gaining in strength. Still, it is not unreasonable to vigorously and intelligently struggle for a world of decency. A decent world is perhaps not likely but it is not impossible. It is possible. And I don't mean just *logically* possible. It is logically possible that corn grows at the North or South Poles. We have had enough of Cartesianism.

If, for example, Bernie Sanders would have won the presidential election in the United States—a little counterfactual history—the United States would have gotten a little better. The United States would, for example, not sell so many arms to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel. It would not be so strongly in the hands of corporate capitalism. That Sanders would have gotten the Democratic Party nomination was not impossible but it was unlikely. And he did not get it. The dominant rather conservative powers of the Democratic Party connived against him. But it was not just utopian to struggle on for his election. It was not like Jill Stein's. And even without Sanders getting the nomination, the vast support of the young that he did get will have its wholesome effect on U.S. politics. It has forced Clinton a little more to the left in assertion at least and, even more importantly, the next time after four years of corporate client Clinton, if climate change doesn't bless us with disaster, the Republican Party (the Grand Old Party of Lincoln) very well may have been reduced to

a rump party or even utterly disappear as the 'funny money' party did in Canada. And the Democratic Party may well become the *de facto* conservative party of the United States, replaced on the progressive side by a Sanders' style social democratic party. A party that Sanders calls socialist but mistakenly so as he well knows. But it is social democratic in the tradition of Franklin Roosevelt. But it will have many of the elements of socialism. As he made very clear, he set out to defeat the corporate capitalist greedy dominance that it rides high in the United States. But unlike a genuine socialist, he is not for the public ownership of the means of production or state control of industry. But what is immediately possible is that we can have with Sanders the genuine possibility of a major party in Franklin Roosevelt's sense in the driver's seat four years hence from 2016. Sanders and many like-minded people are forming the structures for it. And after four years of Clinton's blessing gracing us, the extensive discontent that is very likely to have been well sustained and perhaps enhanced during her tenure such that a Sandernista Party will come into existence and that party will gain power in reaction to such conservative swerving. Clinton in bed with Goldman Sachs. We have a lot of discontent now and Clinton as president is likely to enhance it. How likely we do not know. But we, genuinely realistically have something to fight for to turn this increasingly bad world around. But I am glad concerning that outcome that I am not in the betting business. What will happen is clearly uncertain. But that should not and morally must not lessen our determination to struggle. Even if it comes to again and again losing. We must remember Brecht's determination.

II

Sometimes even against the odds we should, both morally speaking and pragmatically speaking, knowing that what we committed to will likely be defeated, still go for, and vigorously for, what we are committed to. For example, for now (June 2016) I am (if indeed I could vote) for Bernie Sanders with enthusiasm and against both Clinton and against the glorious Trump if that becomes an issue. However, if I were *just* a neutral observer and predictor of what I take to be the normal and

well considered to be normal now (2016-17) I would bet on Clinton winning the Democratic nomination as being very likely to be so. The Democratic Convention later confirmed this. But that is not a matter of a voting preference but of predicting what will happen. It does not commit me to going with the flow. Indeed, I was both angry and sad at what happened to Sanders. But not surprised. I did not want that to happen but unfortunately I thought that it would. That sickens me. But it does not lessen my determination to fight back. We are moral agents not just observers and predictors. But we should distinguish what we think will happen and what we want to happen and what we will struggle to make happen. This is important for our being able to struggle effectively. Now (September 2016), I would, though bitterly, vote for Clinton against Trump as the least bad thing in the circumstances to do. Not circumstances that make me dance with joy.

When I respect my normative and political self and reflect, this is what I sadly believe will happen. When I am trying to ascertain and determine what is likely to happen it is one thing; what I think would be the best thing to happen is another. (I am not just talking about logical possibilities but about reasonable probabilities.) What I should do in the light of what is likely to be the case is still another matter. But that does not mean that I should fold my sails and go with the flow. Certainly not! In voting, if I could vote there, I would resolutely and delightedly vote for Sanders and hope, of course, that he would win. But I could still believe that it is likely, though not certain, that he will lose (which I discovered he did shortly after I first wrote this). I think that, and indeed confidently, it would be a very good thing if Sanders would have won. A good thing morally and politically but also rationally and reasonably. But when I think about what is just likely to happen, I think that we will have Clinton as the Democratic winner on the Democratic side in the election and that she will easily defeat Trump. (I regretfully became less confident of that later in July, 2016. Michael Moore later helped in this. *Whatever* we say concerning these matters, I don't think we need any moral philosophy or any other kind of philosophy here but rather some empirical scientific political considerations and some commonsense understanding. But even this does not settle the issue. There

are existential 'soul ripping' matters here that are sometimes rationally inescapable. We can always become couch potatoes. But that is to be evasive of our concern for humanity. Am I reduced to metaphor here? Well, sometimes metaphors do well. But it is always conceptually and logically possible to say what a metaphor is a metaphor of. However, sometimes there is no need to bother.

III

I shall turn now in the last part of this article to an illustration; to, that is, what is in reality a characterization of how in certain circumstances concerning our common experience where we make normative judgments, sometimes including moral judgments and sometimes even political moral judgments, that are groundless but also ones that are not either existential judgments or just routine banal judgments. For example, whether for a banality to have a chocolate milkshake or a vanilla milkshake. There are sometimes matters quite different from the above normative orientations or the milkshake example. They neither are existential judgments nor philosophical judgments nor banalities. They are, however, common matters. But there is no reason to think they are either grounded in reason or are just emotive or merely conventional or must be so.

To illustrate a choice that is not irrational or unreasonable and not philosophically imbued or of practical importance or even of theoretical interest but may be, and not infrequently is, of a Sartrean-Putnamian importance by illustrating a genuine choice that is, though unlike the Sartrean-Putnamian existential choices but like them in certain respects as by being personally important. But it is not like their existential choices. I will by contrast give a morally, politically and intellectually banal case that may be of considerable importance to the chooser or choosers, while neither being existential nor something that is empirically establishable and taken generally to be of importance. Nor is it like the milkshake case.

To exemplify, here is the case which for me was once an individual one that was then of considerable importance to me but clearly not of a moral or political or social importance or interest.

My illustration is from my own life. The illustration is a non-ethical, non-political, non-social matter. Something that would not and should not be of interest to moral philosophers. During my senior year in high school in the middle of World War II I was a basketball player on my school's team. During my last year that team lost, except for me, what otherwise would have been its regular team of first-string players to the army draft during the war. This seriously weakened the team. I was registered to go into the Merchant Marine's officer training school but after graduation at the end of the school year so I did not have to go to the training school during the basketball playing season and that did not on my part inadvertently weaken things for the team. As a result, I could play basketball for the whole season. So I remained as one of the team's former first-string members still playing. I played in game after game without my former first-string mates. Purely by accident this happened to our team rather than to such an extent to the other teams we played against. I played then on a weaker team than I played on before that season. During that last year for me the army draft called away the other first-string members of the team such that in that last year the players whom I now played with were younger, less experienced players replacing our other senior players who went off to fight in the war. Undoubtedly because of that, as it turned out we lost game after game that year. One of them was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. I didn't quit but played on, trying as hard as I could to help the team. But in spite of my efforts it was to no avail. I have always assumed, though I did not know that it was so, that the opposing teams were lucky enough to not have been so seriously culled.

My struggles, my commitments, my judgments, my decisions concerning these struggles were not of moral or political significance but they were not of a chocolate-or-vanilla milkshake type either. They were for me then my heartfelt serious decisions to try to keep our team from going under. But they were not political decisions and commitments or otherwise moral ones. They were not reason-determined decisions and commitments either. And though not reason-determined, they were not unreasonable or irrational ones. But they were also not rationalized ones. They were taken to heart by me with vigor. But they were not taken as moral duties. And others could understand that that

was so. But they were not moral decisions or political ones. They were just non-reasonable. Not something that being reasonable or rational requires. But they are not unusual, untutored, untoward or even strange. But they do not fit a Kantian, Benthamite, Humean or Sidgwickian conception of when we make in certain fairly common circumstances moral decisions about what is to be done. They were not reason-oriented but they were not unreasonable, let alone irrational. They were not in accordance with reason but they were not irrational, and they were not required by or attuned to reason either. But at that time they were very important to me. They were common, not unreasonable human judgments or orientations not to be downplayed or downgraded but not to be trumpeted either. And not to be regarded as being just banal. We should add such matters to our considerations of what is to be done in life. To how to live our lives. Not everything that fits this should be philosophical, moral, religious or scientific. Or of such interests. When it comes to matters that we regard as important and normatively so we humans have a variety of very diverse things. Reason or unreason does not rule the world.

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