

10. Human Nature and the Cry for Justice

Those who say that human nature is primarily characterized by greed and competition are mistaken. Among mammalian species humans are among the most empathetic and cooperative. Bears are among the most solitary and competitive of mammals. They hunt alone. Adult male bears are viciously competitive for mating rights. Among bears we see intense cooperativeness only among the solitary female bear and her cubs. In contrast to bears, wolves use cooperativeness to become successful hunters. Like wolves, the hunter-gatherer tribes of pre-civilization humans won their food through cooperation. It is because of their intense human cooperativeness that the prey of humans included adult elephants and rhinos. These huge, tough, adult animals have no other predator.

Humans are cooperative not only to gain their biological basics, but also in their extreme empathy for one another, as well as their empathy for many other species. Even the prey of most hunter-gather societies were empathetically studied, ritualized as relatives, and respected as companions in the grand overview of life. Our profound consciousness of consciousness came into being within already empathetic, cooperative human societies. Human babies raised by wolves or some other species, who are then returned to human society, have an enormous amount of catching up to do.

Biological life as a whole is cooperative. The vast drama of evolution does include competition as a factor of its dynamism; nevertheless, the drama of evolution is also cooperative. The cells of our bodies are marvelous examples of cooperation. Further, each of our cells is itself a “metropolis” of cooperating simpler cells of life. Every well-established ecosystem is a manifestation of cooperation as well as competition. We vastly oversimplify when we view biology and human history through a narrow vision that over-emphasizes the aspect of competitive struggle.

The Deadly Sin of Greed

Greed has been well discussed by humans as a perversion of our nature, as part of a tragic *fall* from our profound human essence. The metaphor of a “greed gene” is profoundly misleading: our nature is not greed. As a form of estrangement from our true nature, “greed” means the quest for more and more and still more that we erroneously hope will alleviate the pain of finitude with a state of complete security, privilege, and abundance. So defined, “greed” is clearly an illusory quest. The pursuit of happiness is a deeper matter than simply having more wealth.

It may be true that a cold and starving human can increase his or her happiness with a simple meal and a warm fire. But a billionaire does not increase his or her happiness with a second billion. The quest for extensive comparative status and power was scorned in a typical hunter-gatherer society. Only within the mode of social organization called “civilization” did gross indulgence in greed become allowable and quite commonly encouraged.

As an organizing principle the invention of hierarchy was a technology that made large-social organizations viable. A hierarchy of classes was the social innovation that enabled the ever-larger structures of civilization. These larger structures enabled the monumental achievements and deepening consciousness that has characterized the civilizational era. At the same time, the construction of economic classes fostered a *fall* into a depth of greed that remains to this day a form of horrific estrangement from our primal human empathy and cooperativeness. When we who live in so-called “democratic civilizations” allow a huge share of our social wealth to be held by a very small portion of our population, we are not living in accord with our nature. Furthermore, we are undermining our best vision of democracy. Our social

organizations are simply failing when we allow or force a large portion of our population to be without certainty of their next meal, a warm place to sleep, security, healthcare, a chance for remunerative work, an education, or any other of the basic social participations in human cooperativeness. Indeed, the very existence of poverty is a sign of the obsolescence of civilization as a humane mode of social organization. Being comfortable with or unconscious of the flaws of our civilized mode of social arrangement is a manifestation of our estrangement from others, from our own best selves, from the evolution of our species, and from the Power that posits us in being.

The Cry to End Poverty

Within the United States, poverty could be eliminated by employing Martin Luther King Junior's proposal of a universal stipend distributed through the income-tax system. Here is King's proposal in brief outline: Put everyone on an assured minimum income using the already well-organized income tax system. Allocate a minimum income return check to every person whether they earned income or not. This would result in saving lots of money, King argued. It would make customers out of wards of the state, upon whom the state now spends much more money on relief programs, public housing, and prisons. This would end poverty in the United States with one congressional law and its presidential signature.

This proposal is passionately opposed by those who hold the view that economic life should be a competitive monopoly game with a few big winners and with many losers who are blamed for their lazy play. Apparently, the U.S. citizenry, cannot yet tolerate giving up our competitive-monopoly-game life story. "We all have to earn our way," so we say. We also assume, "We all have to do something in addition to being born to be worthy of minimum care." Very few of us think that way within our own families. But we have been brainwashed to think that way within the broad social economy. We need King's new mind on this topic. King received stronger rejection for challenging our mindset on poverty than he did for challenging our racism.

Human social life is much more complicated than our blaming-the-poor-and-idolizing-the-rich type of social thinking. Though the dynamic of competition is real and unavoidable, human social life is far more than a competitive game. Society essentially is, and could manifestly be, a cooperative and empathetic construction in which everyone is valued no matter how minor their social contribution. Getting born can be viewed as contribution enough to deserve a basic level of support and affirmation.

Absolute economic equality is not viable or needed. Additional monetary power, as well as added responsibility, can be awarded to those making the larger and most needed social contributions. Such a reasonable pattern can exist alongside a full elimination of poverty (as well as any need for a billionaire status). It is typical for a loving family to follow the ethical principle of care by the relatively wealthy for the almost impoverished. Those who ideologically resist applying such sensibilities to society as a whole are guilty of an intense form of greed—a greed that is rationalized by phony excuse-making on the part the rich, and too often believed by the poor as well.

The speculative means of making money from money itself could be severely limited by tax policies and basic structures. Huge banking establishments that make their profits with risky bets, and then ask government tax payers to stand good for their losses, could be broken up into organizations that serve the population rather than rob it. Even without further exploring the details of a poverty-free society, we can opt for its possibility; we can begin our repentance for the greed that is permitted by and embedded within the vast inequity that we so unconsciously tolerate and call "free-enterprise democracy." Let us begin our repentance by just calling it "greed."

Let us hear within ourselves the cry for justice—the cry to fight against the estrangement of greed within our species and within ourselves. Let us notice that this cry is not a cry of weakness. It is a strong cry, a type of scream in the belly. Even though creating justice is also a calm, careful, thoughtful work, the motive power for justice is a loud protest originating in the core of our being.

The Cry to End Hierarchical Order

We can probe even deeper into the horrific estrangement allowed and even fostered by the civilization-mode of social organization. Our being also calls for ongoing repentance from our craze for hierarchical status—our stinking thinking that classist patterns are natural to the human species. Topdown modes of social ordering and decision making can be replaced by grassroots-out consensus building that makes everyone a participant in choosing what is right and wrong, what is just and unjust, what is ecologically advantageous and what is not. With proper arrangements we can structure planet-wide consensus building that includes all eight billion people. This arrangement would include the basic question of whether there should be fewer of us. Let us notice that hierarchical rule is enhanced by unrestricted population growth—more people means cheaper labor, more pawns to do the jobs no aristocrat would stoop to do, more desperate citizens volunteering to fight wars to preserve the power and status of the wealthy.

We could begin now educating the billions to be informed, compassionate, effective, global citizens of the various neighborhoods, regions, and continents of this one planetary matrix of human presence. Such a direction can be taken in spite of the fact that this emerging vision of social justice will be violently opposed by those who are comfortable and defensive with regard to retaining their greedy estrangement from profound humanness. This tragic state of rich and poor alike is allowed and fostered by the civilization mode of social organization.

The Cry for Just Power

In order to overcome 6000 years of aristocratic momentum, we will find it necessary to establish and respect effective, democratic governing *power*. Such power is absolutely necessary to restrain the greed and power-lust to which humans are currently habituated. Such effective governing power will also be needed to support a viable order of justice. The current foolishness of libertarian politicians and laissez-faire economists needs to be ridiculed, and ultimately eliminated from intelligent social discussion. These hypocrites cast disdain upon government, yet spend many millions of dollars to own the government and use it for purposes of independent greed.

The increasingly widespread disrespect or outright hatred of governing power must be replaced by a mode of governing that is joyous—joyous because it is genuinely government of, by, and for the people. Yes, let us take joy in defeating those who lust for governing power in order to do away with responsible governing power. These ideological screwballs are actually puppets supporting the dictatorial power of existing wealth. Current U.S. libertarians are, willingly or not, doing the bidding of the most greedy elements of our society—those who strive to reduce governing power over their greed.

It is a still further depravity to add to the misguided fight against governing power the overreach of governing power into the bedrooms and doctors' offices of the citizenry. We now have office holders (erroneously called "conservatives") who would be more appropriately called "sociopaths." Such degenerate qualities lodged in existing governments deserve our grim disgust, but we must not hate governing power itself. Our challenge is not to do away with government, but to make governing better in a

thoroughgoing manner. Social power itself, when constructed by the consent of the governed, is a necessary “good” for bringing about any viable, sustainable, post-poverty, post-hierarchical social system of justice. It is not the restraining power of government that we should fear: it is allowing such power to be owned and controlled by the greedy few, the rampantly bigoted, or the sociologically deluded.

Love, Power, and Justice

Love, power, and justice are companion factors in a viable Christian ethics. We must understand that in spite of our estrangement from our true, profound essence, we are compassionate beings, a compassion that can be accessed historically. In spite of our malice, malice is not who we essentially are. In spite of our greed, greed is not who we essentially are. In spite of our lazy indulgence in obsolete social patterns, lazy indulgence is not who we essentially are. We are essentially a cry for *social justice* among humans. This cry for justice also plays out between humans and our one, available, inhabitable planet for which humans are now substantially responsible. Yet we escape-minded humans are willing to spend billions of dollars getting a few humans off the planet on a trip to Mars, while being unwilling to spend sufficient billions in down-to-Earth programs of justice for all humans and for the Earth itself.

A true cry for justice is something more than an idolization of a humanly invented set of principles; it is a life passion within our own deep human essence to create a workable form of living within the existing environment—a life in tune with our inheritance from the past and our possibilities for the future. No construction of justice is absolutely correct for our time, and our temporal solutions will be even less applicable to future times. Justice is an ongoing construction of viable social ordering, sourced from our compassionate, empathetic, and cooperative essential humanity.

Obeying this cry for justice is essential for any viable humane presence on this planet. And responsible *social power* is an equally crucial factor of a complete Christian social ethics. Any relevant temporal vision of *justice* cries out to be empowered governmentally. We are social beings, communal creatures as well as differentiated individuals. We put in place the *social power* that governs us—restrains our worst features and offers opportunities for our best inclinations. Without *social power*, there is no *justice*. Without *justice*, *social power* is tyrannical. Without *love*, there is no creation of *justice*. Without the creation of *justice* and its governmental empowerment, *love* is perverted into an aloof sentimentality.

The sort of *love* that goes with the honoring of *social power* and the creation of social *justice* was exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus was a social revolutionary of a deeply spiritual sort. In the tradition according to Luke, Jesus began his public life in this way:

When he came to Nazareth where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to do the reading and was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The spirit (*breath, wind*) of the Lord (*Final Reality*) is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor,
He has sent me to announce pardon to the prisoners, and recover sight to the blind,
to set free the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s amnesty.
(*to announce the new era of Final Reality’s action*)”

After rolling up the scroll, he gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the attention of everyone in the synagogue was riveted on him. He began by saying to

them, "today this scripture has come true as you listened."¹

This is certainly one of the passages that portrays Jesus as a social revolutionary. Let us note, however, that his good news to the poor was not that poverty was going to be done away with in their lifetimes. While he challenged everyone to relieve the needs of the poor, his message to the poor was deeper than a politician's promise that better days were on the way. To the poor his good news was that they were not riffraff who deserved the existing despised status that the rich and powerful claimed they deserved. Rather, Jesus was revealing this to the poor, "You are prisoners of a perverse social system and you need to be pardoned and set loose. Both you and your prison guards are blind humans who need to wake up. You are being needlessly oppressed. You can be set free right now. Release is happening to you right now as you listen to these words being spoken to you in the breath of Final Reality by one who is anointed by that essential "Spirit wind."

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So let us experience, feel, and brood upon our own deep cry for justice. Let this cry from our own deep nature fertilize our solitary practice, our communal rituals, our daily schedules, our vocational aspirations, our interpersonal relations, our whole Earth affections, and everything else that fills our days, our dreams, and hopefully our memories as well.

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¹ Luke 4:16-21 (the Jesus Seminar translation in *The Five Gospels* plus my parenthetical additions)