The Measure of Civilizations

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Is it possible to compare civilizations one with another? Is it possible, in other words, to construct some neutral and objective framework in terms of which we could establish in what respects one civilization might deserve to be ranked more highly than its competitors? Morality will surely provide one axis of such a framework (and we note in passing that believers in Islam might quite reasonably claim that their fellow-believers are characteristically more moral than are many in the West). Criteria such as material well-being will need to play a role, too, as also will happiness or pleasure (and again we note that it is not clear *a priori* that there is more happiness in the West than there is in other civilizations). We cannot, therefore, expect to be able to formulate some single criterion, which would enable us to rank civilizations in a simple unilinear order. Even happiness (*pace* some proponents of the utilitarian philosophy) comes in different types, and to count in the civilization stakes the happiness involved would presumably need to be of the right kind. Thus it is not clear that happiness derived from, say, taking drugs or torturing small animals is going to be able to count in favor of a civilization as much as, say, happiness derived from reading poetry.

Balch's Paradox

In addressing the idea of an objective framework for evaluating civilizations we are of course addressing also the problem of relativism – the problem of whether good and bad, better and worse, in this or in that respect, can be applied to civilizations or cultures taken as a whole. Does this not presuppose what some, disparagingly, like to call the "God's eye perspective"? Most people go through their lives without even once considering problems such as this. They are, in

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the relativism stakes, simply neutral – they do not care. Among those who do care there are at the extremes two groups. On the one hand are the standard-bearers of relativism, a group which consists of bad French philosophers, many members of the Modern Languages Association, most undergraduates entering American colleges and universities, and (*ex officio*) the lawyers of Larry Flint and Bill Clinton. On the other hand there are the enemies of relativism, a no less motley group, which consists of Jerry Falwell, the Pope, believers in Islam, and the members of the National Assocation of Scholars. I am going to focus my attentions primarily on the last two constituencies mentioned: on believers in Islam, because they will serve as a handy foil for the representatives of the West in the discussions to follow, and on members of the NAS, because I take them to be among the more articulate standard-bearers of what I am here, somewhat loosely, calling 'Western civilization.'

To make bedfellows of these two groups is not so unreasonable as might first appear. There are, after all, a number of respects in which members of the NAS ought to feel quite comfortable with Islamic universities. The latter are marked by a genuine respect for venerable traditions. Their curricula are mercifully free of programs in (say) lefthanded oppression studies, and they are free, too, of commencement speeches by Goldie Hawn. Islamic universities are, surely, valiant defenders of the values of truth and justice. Their students, by all accounts, take their studies seriously, and they have a healthy regard for the distinction between what is true and what is false. They believe in objective morality and they are surely more moral in practice than are many of the students in contemporary American universities. But still, many of us will feel that there is something missing from Islamic universities. As a first hypothesis we might suggest that the wrong people are in charge, and that the wrong doctrines are being imposed. But consider the following thought-experiment. Imagine that President Balch and the Board of Directors of the NAS have been placed in charge of the Umm Al-Qura University and that they have issued instructions to faculty explaining exactly what and how they are to teach. Imagine that the right educational values have in this way been imposed from above. Would this solve the problem?

This is what might be called Balch's Paradox. On the one hand the NAS wants faculty members to do the right thing. We want universities to be operated according to the principles of the NAS. At the same time we want people to do the right thing of their own free will. But which would

we prefer: A university system realizing all the values of academic freedom in the familiar Western sense, but overrun by relativists and English professors? Or a university system full of people doing genuinely valuable scholarly work in the spirit of objective truth and clarity of expression – but only because Ayatollah Balch has commanded them to do so? For me, at least, the choice is clear – and this is in spite of the fact that I am entirely convinced that the spreading of relativism and of the currently fashionable nonsense of the English departments is pernicious through and through.

The Utility of Freedom

Why do we want people to do the right thing *of their own free will*? One reason might be the practical one advanced already by Mill as part of his defense of the freedom of speech. We cannot know in advance what the correct answer to any given hard problem might be. We therefore leave people the freedom to advance as many alternative answers as possible, even at the risk of all manner of craziness and dross. Their efforts are then in sum more likely to yield results closer to the truth than would those achieved under more constrained conditions. But then we can modify our thought-experiment in such a way as to set this pragmatic factor out of account. We can imagine that the authority and wisdom, not to speak of the divine inspiration, of Ayatollah Balch are so great that he is able to make the faculty in Mecca find exactly the right answers to important questions of science and scholarship at his mere command.

Even this (I hope it is clear) would not suffice: we (in the West) want people to do the right thing *of their own free will*. But why? One reason, in the case in hand, might have to do with the needs of evidence gathering and epistemic justification. If people come to these or those results freely, then this provides independent support for the validity of these results. It gives us extra reason to think that they are true. This cannot be the whole story, however, for our intuition to the effect that there is something intrinsically better about people doing the right thing of their own free will, rather than at the command of Balch, holds quite generally – it applies to human actions of all sorts – and not just in the realm of evidence and knowledge.

A further problem turns on the fact that, while the intrinsic value of freedom comes close to being a self-evident truth for us in the West, it seems not to be self-evident to all human beings.

Saddam Hussein is well pleased when his people celebrate his birthday in glorious pomp merely because they have been commanded to do so. He seems to set no store by the fact that something is done freely; and the same is true, it seems, for very many tyrants and despots, both large and small. Moreover, letting freedom take its course can of course lead also to bad consequences – something which makes it very easy for some to argue that freedom is not an unalloyed good and thus that it needs to be constrained. We cannot, therefore, say that the West is best at least in this respect: that it has more freedom, or more respect for freedom, than this or that other civilization, because views differ from civilization to civilization on the issue of whether freedom is an intrinsic value.

The Papal Revolution

How, then, are we to exploit the factor of freedom as part of our efforts to establish a neutral framework for the evaluation of civilizations? To answer this question we need to go back in time to the point where the Western world – which at this time means: the world of Western Christendom – is facing what we might call the Y1K Problem. The millennium has passed and – contrary to expectations nurtured by the Church – Jesus has not returned to Earth. The Church responds to the resultant widespread anger and consternation by establishing, slowly but surely, a new view of the role of Church in its relation to earthly powers, a view according to which the reason why Jesus has not returned to Earth is because the Earth is *not yet good enough for him*. It is, accordingly, a sacred task of mankind here on Earth, a task to be undertaken under the authority of the Pope to help make the Earth a better place, that it might be deserving of Christ's return.

This new conception represented a fateful step in the history of the Church and of the Western civilization which it did so much to shape and nurture. For it meant that your actions here on Earth, your contributions to improving the lot of mankind – for example through the founding of universities or of monastic orders – can be of importance for your salvation in heaven. This set in train a thousand-year development whose late phases are documented by Max Weber in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* This is a development by which some other civilizations were for a long time marked unsystematically at best, but which has extended itself geographically over time above all through the impact of Western models.

The significance of the proposition to the effect that your life *on Earth* can have meaning accordingly extends not just to the West, where it has become entrenched in the very sinews of our souls, but to humanity in general. We in the West came to the realization that life here on Earth can have meaning for religious reasons of a quite specific sort. But the core of this thesis can be taken also independently of these religious reasons. And in this form, I suggest, it can be used as one further criterion by which to measure civilizations.

The Meaning of Life

But what is the meaning of life? What makes your life worth living? Happiness, some will say. But suppose you can have all the happiness you like by taking special pills or drinking just the right amounts of vodka? Perhaps love is what makes for a meaningful life. But falling in love, wonderful though it may be, is just an event, a threshold between two phases of your existence, and it is how you and your loved one shape your new lives together that matters for meaningfulness, and this means that you each still need to decide what to do next with your lives. Knowledge, for similar reasons, does not make a life worth living. Imagine that you could take a pill and immediately become as knowledgeable as the world's leading expert in quantum mechanics. You would still need to decide what to do with your new-found knowledge. And similarly if you suddenly become very rich: you would still need to work out what to do with your new-found riches.

What makes a life worth living is, accordingly, not happiness, not love, not knowledge, not riches. Rather it has something to do with what you do, here on Earth. A meaningful life is a life upon which some sort of pattern has been imposed – a pattern which relates not merely to what goes on inside your head but which involves also, in serious ways, your having an effect upon the world. Beethoven, Mohammed, Alekhine, Farraday all led meaningful lives, according to this criterion, because in giving shape to their own lives they also shaped the world around them.

But now it is crucially important that to contribute to meaningfulness this imposed shape or pattern must be the result of your efforts and of your free decision. We have here the beginnings of an argument why freedom can serve, alongside morality, happiness, and material well-being,

as a scale with which to measure civilizations. If you want to lead a meaningful life, then this means that you yourself have to decide how to shape your life and how to shape the world in which you live. This shape must be non-trivial – it should consist in more than just getting drunk every day. This means that it must involve genuine and coherently directed effort, and this means in turn that this effort must be directed and callibrated in relation to some independent standards of success and failure, standards which could be applied, in principle, by other people. A meaningful life is a life which consists in your making and realizing what are for you ambitious and difficult plans, plans in relation to which there exist genuine measures of success and therefore also the risk of failure.

Doctors lead meaningful lives, and so also do physicists and architects. Baseball players and opera-singers lead meaningful lives, and so also do horse-trainers and the members of the International Judo Federation. For in all these cases there are measures of success and failure which can easily be applied, in the light of day, and which are well-callibrated against the amount of care, effort and skill that is invested in the corresponding achievements.

Notice that this definition makes the meaning of your life something objective. You may lead a meaningful life without knowing it or without caring about it. But equally, you may *think* you lead a meaningful life when in fact you do not do so. Suppose that you are an ambitious young artist. You have a successful career; your paintings are exhibited regularly because they sell very well. In fact, however, they are being bought by your rich uncle who has taken pity on you because you are such a bad painter. You think you lead a meaningful life, but you are mistaken. Whether you lead a meaningful life depends in every case not on your, or other people's, beliefs or feelings, but on what you do, on what you achieve, and thus on the degree to which through your efforts you succeed in imposing a pattern on your life and on the world around you. A meaningful life, in short, is a life which rests on honest achievement.

Businesspeople, too, lead meaningful lives, the success of their efforts being callibrated by the public measure of profit and loss. Moreover, they lead meaningful lives in no small part by providing the resources and possibilities which enable others to lead meaningful lives in their turn. They help others to realize their goals and they create the systems and tools which allow ever

more complex plans to be realized by others. We in the modern world hereby benefit from a virtuous cycle: individuals and institutions compete with each other, hereby promoting an end which is no part of their intention, to find ever new ways of helping people to make their lives ever more meaningful.

Conclusions

I would like, therefore, to propose that in addition to morality, material well-being, and happiness, we accept also *degree of conduciveness to the leading of meaningful lives* as a factor to be weighed in the balance when evaluating civilizations. Rather than explore the results of applying this idea to the actual task of weighing one civilization against another, let me conclude by turning the somewhat easier task of weighing developments in our institutions of higher education in America today.

Institutions and their policies and programs, too, can be measured by their degree of conduciveness to the leading of meaningful lives among those who participate in them. That universities have through time served as instruments which can facilitate the leading of more meaningful lives on the part of the students who attend them is I hope clear. The liberal arts are called 'liberal' precisely because they serve the end of training free human beings – in contrast to the *artes illiberales*, which are pursued for economic purposes. The aim of liberal education is to prepare the student for the pursuit of higher things. Universities are – in principle at least – able to create the conditions in which students can learn to measure themselves against hard tasks and acquire the tools and options for the making of more complex and ambitious and courageous plans. Universities can teach their students to live their lives as free beings conscious of the values of truth and honesty, effort and diligence. But this will be so only to the degree that universities themselves impose stringent conditions of grading on merit and embrace a conception of their mission as one that is devoted to the pursuit of truth under conditions of free and open inquiry. Especially in the natural sciences much of this callibration is still preserved. The SAT, GRE and other standardized tests are (still) among the glories of the American system of higher education (and are in no small part responsible for the qualitative superiority of American universities over their European counterparts – one reason why the British Government is currently looking into the possibility of introducing the SAT as a replacement for its current, failed system of university admissions examinations).

It almost goes without saying, however, that the callibration of our universities towards the ends of respect for merit, fairness and truth has in other respects been eroded considerably in recent times. Relativism predominates not just in the untutored thinking of our undergraduates, who assume that the idea of truth is in some way incompatible with the idea of tolerance for others' views; it predominates also on the side of many of their professors, where it has infected entire disciplines hitherto dedicated to venerable forms of inquiry.

Perhaps the saddest developments are those documented by Alan Kors and Harvey Silverglade in their book *The Shadow University*. To lead a meaningful life it helps if you live in an environment in which the right sorts of consequences follow from your actions – a society in which you are rewarded for doing the right thing and punished for doing the wrong thing, so that your activities are structured in relation to the right sorts of measures of success applied fairly and in the light of day. As Kors and Silverglade show, almost everyone involved in contemporary universities is subject to a system in which what goes on behind the scenes is entirely at variance with the noble goals which are promulgated before the public. It is a system in which constantly the wrong signals are sent to students as to the relation between achievement and reward. It is a system in which whole arms of the university are dedicated to the task of teaching students not to act as free individuals but rather to conform to what is expected of them (politically) as members of specific groups.

English departments remain politicized, and their graduates are systematically politicizing the teaching of English in high schools and elsewhere. But there are also signs of hope, as the work of the NAS, FIRE and other such bodies makes clear, and we can comfort ourselves with the thought that those of us who work in universities are currently faced with many opportunities to add meaning to our own lives precisely by helping to create the conditions for whole generations of students to lead meaningful lives in the future.[2]

[2] The ideas on meaning underlying these informal remarks have been developed at length in a work in progress entitled *The Meaning of Life*, which is co-authored by Berit Brogaard. My thinking on the Papal Revolution and on the special character of the Western civilization which it helped to shape has been influenced considerably by the writings of Philippe Nemo. See especially his "The Invention of Western Reason" in Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith (eds.), *Rationality and Irrationality*, Vienna: öbv&hpt, 2001.