Nick Berry

know fear, know courage™

Essays

For the record

For the record, I was reading Deuteronomy and Leviticus, not the Gospels, in search of something temporally closer to Heraclitus. On which point, it struck me as remarkable to discover that he, fellow prince Siddhartha Gautama, Confucius and Lao Tse were direct contemporaries. In all c. 300,000 years of the ambitiously named *homo sapiens*, each of those four was drawing breath at the same time. This struck me as remarkable until I recalled that Bach, Handel and Scarlatti were all born in 1685. Or reflected on the writers who surrounded Shakespeare, or that the European baroque in music and the Italian Renaissance in painting each lasted three generations, from start to finish, and each left their respective art forms unrecognisable. Roughly the same time period and result as what we call the Shakespearean theatre.

I have no problem with the Gospels, even the difficult bits, even the virgin birth. That apparent oddity, in the context of what human history has paraded over the last century or two, strikes me as banal. I found myself recounting a story the other day that caused me to weep in the telling. A nine-year-old girl and her seven-year-old brother are recently disembarked from a train, on which they have been travelling in cramped conditions for many hours. The girl asks the boy where his suitcase is, or shoes, or cap. Whichever it was, has been mislaid. She scolds him severely for his carelessness. At that moment, she is taken from him and led away to the women's quarters, while he is taken to the gas chamber. Their terminus was Auschwitz. And people have trouble coping with the idea of a virgin birth?

The point of the telling was to illustrate Heraclitus' vision of relativity: that everything in the universe is expressed

in relation to its opposite. Even a crime of such limitless monstrosity can – must – in its epochal evil produce something of equivalent beauty. The girl in that story lived into her 90s, I think. She went to the US after the war. For the rest of her life, she never said anything to anyone on parting that was not worthy of being the last thing she said to him or her on earth. How much beauty did that produce over the remaining eight decades of her life? Pain is the midwife to joy, joy the harbinger of pain, and neither is to be, nor can be, resisted, or despised.

Last summer, I was sitting outside my favourite Sønderborg bar in the sun, looking across the water and observing the yachts and their owners. Everything from wealthy Germans and Dutch and Swiss, to retired Danes and local boat enthusiasts. As tends to happen, I fell into conversation with what turned out to be four American sisters on a European tour together. There are no coincidences in the world. Of course I had to find you and Eli at UEA. What else was supposed to happen? Anyway, we were talking of things, which became increasingly personal, and one of the sisters burst into tears. Not a bit of a sniffle, but what the Germans call crying *Rotz und Wasser*; snot and water. She was embarrassed and her sisters solicitous. I said to her something like: 'Do not be ashamed of your tears. You are carrying some deep pain inside you and it has come out. Can you look me in the eyes and tell me what it is?'

So she did, through her tears. She explained that her first pregnancy ended in the worst imaginable manner. She was close to term, approaching eight months, and the doctors told her that her child would not long survive the birth, or would be stillborn. 'What were the chances?', she asked. '80%, perhaps higher. Should we abort?' The most terrible of choices. She chose to abort, or, as I put it to her, to kill her own child. I felt that she needed to hear those words spoken by someone other than herself. This had all happened nine years previously, and she now had three healthy and lovely daughters; but she could neither forget nor forgive her decision.

Once that glass had smashed on the floor, the four of them were able to talk more openly. I had been telling of the grief I felt on losing my niece, and that had triggered her. I suggested, from my experience, that she could not run from her grief, as she carried it inside her and it would out, from time to time. It would never leave her until she showed it that it had no power over her any more. Grief lives in the subconscious, and is happy to stay in residence as long as you keep paying the bills. She asked how this might be done. I shared my experience of speaking to it; turning to face her unborn child and looking it in the eye as she had me when she told me her story. The child has already forgiven her. She needs to forgive herself.

She seemed sceptical, and fair enough, so I asked her to describe the physical, as opposed to spiritual, experience of giving birth to her first surviving daughter.

'Was that a pleasant experience? Did you enjoy it?'

'No, it was agony.'

'And out of that agony came what? When you allow yourself to accept your first child's forgiveness, a joy will be revealed to you, equivalent in magnitude to your pain. It will be as hard accepting that forgiveness as it was making the decision, but you are forgiven. You just need to hear that from your child. Not only forgiven, but loved – loved in equal measure to the agony of your choice. Because who can see another person in torment and not love that person for her humanity? The greater your pain, the greater your humanity, the greater your love. What greater love can a woman show than to give the life of her own child?'

Heraclitus wasn't wrong. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. The universe may be indifferent to us, but we are not to it. I'm not sure I expressed this very well. There is nothing of nihilism in it, nor even ennui. It is a celebration. The greater the indifference of the universe, the more intense can be our appreciation of it; our love for it. I learned this in the cold sea. The habit acquired of ice bathing is my communion with the universe. The tiny, naked speck, in the same body of water, albeit travelling under multiple aliases, that covers three-quarters of the earth's surface. I may as well be staring through the Hubble

telescope. He who made the lamb made the tiger, and also made the elephant, from which the tiger is hunted.

Nature's indifference does not mask divine love; it is divine love. The greatest control of all is no control (try explaining that to power-mad bureaucrats), as it is from this that humility derives. How else could Jesus bring peace but with a sword? The meek shall inherit the earth. It was Eli, female, of EUR, my Norwegian teacher, who decoded that one for me. Our word 'meek' derives from the Norwegian 'myk' (pronounced something like mooookh). It shares the distinction of the words psyche and logos in being not remotely translatable into English. At least, not as one word. In Viking society, the myk did indeed run the place, but the myk were not meek in the understanding of the term we have been encouraged to acquire. Very roughly, the myk person – those the Vikings sought among themselves as their rulers and justices – was he or she, without favour, who exhibited the most thorough combination of martial, agricultural, piscatorial, judicial and pastoral abilities. The myk was the most competent and accomplished person, with the least need to demonstrate those things: the person strong enough to pick a cobweb from the wall without breaking it.

It didn't always work out like that, but Viking society at least tried to find philosopher kings, with Spartan prowess. This is why I am not convinced by Plato's presentation of Socrates' words as describing the body as tomb to the soul. I suspect that to be Plato's wishful thinking, rather than what Socrates said. Nothing in that idea works with my experience of Heraclitean relativity. Cicero nailed it for me in his 'to philosophise is to learn to die'. The body is not tomb to the soul, but an organism that can, if it works on it, apprehend the soul. When it does, the body is ready to return to the earth. The soul, like the universe, doesn't give a stuff either way. It is we who get our knickers knotted. It reminds me of Hamlet's 'let be.' As he points out, you can only let be if you have already done the spadework. Physician, heal thyself.

As to God… In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. That was the

line that triggered my current blur of thinking, six months or more ago. I asked myself: What, then, is the word? Not the word God, but the word ‘word’. On the one hand, it was the word *logos*, which, like the colour we see reflected as yellow, is everything but the word itself. *Logos* is possibly better understood as everything words are and can be than the mere word. So what is the mere word? I sometimes invite people to define the word chair, if the direction of conversation allows. Often, they offer some definition of the thing chair. Sometimes they ask, ‘What? What’s a chair, or what’s the word chair?’, at which point I hand them a Cadbury’s creme egg. If the former happens, I ask: ‘Do we sit on the thing chair or the word chair? OK, so what is the word chair?’

In *Mr God, This Is Anna,* the book that set me thinking about metaphysics aged 12, long before I had heard the word, I learned that the colours we see are the only colour in the spectrum that the object concerned cannot absorb. So a daffodil is all the colours of the spectrum except yellow, which is what it reflects back to us. If that is not scientifically accurate, no matter. It works well enough as a model. Any word in the lexicon might be described as a label that describes the thing it is not. Every word in the lexicon came about because someone, somewhere and at some time, felt the need to have a shorthand noise to represent a particular thing, if only to save the labour of describing a chair from scratch every time it came up in conversation. As far as I can work out, every human society known to anthropology has had some version of the word ‘god’, and all have applied it similarly. Which suggests that the g-word predates the holy books by tens of millennia. So, what was the abstract idea that needed the word god? For what it’s worth, I reckon it was the original act of consciousness: the monkey that realised it was a monkey, and that it was raining, and that it was getting cold, and asked the original question: the first question ever asked and the first question any of us asks post-womb, without being taught it: Why?

I think the g-word was coined to describe the experiencing and the not knowing simultaneously, with

simultaneously the operative word. Einstein described the universe as unknowable; not because we are too thick or because the data are not yet all in, or computing power has yet to reach understanding level, but because it cannot be understood. It is not capable of understanding. Every time a Hubble telescope reveals 100 billion more galaxies, the next Hubble will be getting ready to reveal the next 100 billion. And yet we know it because we live in it. How can you respond to that but with humility? How strong do you need to be to make yourself that weak (myk)? And how great is the joy of not accepting, but loving the not knowing? I am, therefore I do not know, and in accepting the not knowing, I am immortal. Mortality is the flailing insistence on knowing what cannot be known, and in doing so, missing its beauty. Socrates' 'I know nothing', is the definition of the open mind, and the more open the mind, the greater the joy that can enter.

> *[11] When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*
> *[12] For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

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