UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM | THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Education towards a reasonable humanism

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 13th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 9th – Saturday 11th January 2025.

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2025 Jubilee Oriel Conference: Character and Global Challenges

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> "Whether it is easy or not [to know oneself] here is the situation we are in: if we know ourselves, then we might know how to cultivate ourselves; but if we don't know ourselves, we'll never know how". Plato *Alcibiades* 1 128e-129a.[1]

I

Education has many aims, or put another way there many kinds of formal and informal educational activity directed to different sorts of purposes. Some of these are instrumental or utilitarian in character, equipping learners with general or specific skills by which they may pursue various chosen, assigned or circumstantially arising tasks. Others are intended to inculcate qualities of character or to develop appreciation of, and good judgement about things generally regarded as having non-instrumental value (as well as utility) such as health, respectful personal and social relationships, art and beauty.

These instrumental and non-instrumental values both presuppose notions of human nature, ranging from the partial and fragmentary to the comprehensive and integral. In seeking to develop intellectual and practical skills, and to inculcate modes and domains of appreciation, there is an (at least implicit) understanding of the characteristic powers and activities, ranges of desires, needs and interests, dependencies and vulnerabilities of human beings, and of the interplay between these features.

This is one way in which the idea of *human nature* is connected to the aims of education. Another, however, is as itself a focus of teaching and learning. Again, the matter may be implicit, as in much teaching of history, human geography, literature and politics, and more or less limited. At the latter end stands the philosophical-cum-anthropological aim of

[1] *Alcibiades* 1, D.S. Hutchison trans., in J. M. Copper (ed.), *Plato Complete Works*. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett 1997).

understanding the human mode of being. Some see this as a principal and even the primary purpose of education and learning, as suggested by Socrates and as famously proposed by Alexander Pope:

> "The proper study of mankind is man …
> Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
> Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd:
> The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!" [2]

Understanding 'this glory, jest and riddle' has been a recurrent aim of 'humanists' in the cultural and philosophical senses of that term; and with that interest has gone the Platonic idea that understanding our nature is critical for personal well-being and societal development. The latter was a prominent theme of the Italian renaissance which inclined to a highly idealistic view of humanity and a utopian vision of society, as in the writings of the '*umanisti'* Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Mirandola, and Tommasso Campanella.[3] More generally, however, modern literary, and broadly philosophical accounts of what it is to be human tend to be either celebratory (Rousseau and Godwin), gloomy (Hobbes and Nietzsche), condemnatory (Calvin and Schopenhauer); or mixed, as is the view of Pope himself:

> Alas what wonder! Man's superior part,
> Uncheck'd may rise, and climb from art to art;
> But when his own great work is but begun,
> What Reason weaves, by Passion is undone" …
> Virtuous and vicious ev'ry man must be,
> Few in th' extreme, but all in the degree;
> The rogue and fool by fits is fair and wise;
> And ev'n the best, by fits, what they despise.

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[2] *Essay on Man*, Epistle II in *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope* (London: Ward & Lock, 1986) pp. 76 ff.

[3] The actual term 'humanism' is a recent one coined by nineteenth century German scholars ('humanismus') to refer to the literary and intellectual movement begun in the early renaissance and associated with the rediscovery by Petrarch of letters by Cicero. For an excellent historical and philosophical examination of the issue see Georg Henrik von Wright *What is Humanism?* University of Kansas: Department of Philosophy 1976).

II

Many thinkers of the immediately past and present centuries have inclined to greater pessimism, and events have provided grist for their mills. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen wars and terrorism involving the targeting of civilian populations and campaigns of genocide, totalitarian tyrannies, economic crises, mass unemployment, sexual abuse and exploitation, political polarisation, man-made environmental degradation, and other evils. Besides posing practical challenges for individuals and societies these developments put in question ideas of historical progress, of social harmony, and of personal flourishing, and thereby have implications for an understanding of the human condition and for what to teach concerning it and what qualities of character to seek to inculcate in order to enable students to cope with these challenges.

Because of the attention given to the various contemporary evils and the reach of their effects, it is easy to think of them as comprising an unprecedented crisis, but there are historical parallels including for those we think of as distinctly contemporary. It is important to observe this so as to retain balance, but also to consider how analogous circumstances have influenced earlier thinking and to see what lessons might be learned. Scholars investigating what may be the common elements in the decline and collapse of past civilisations generally cite broadly material factors such as population movements, epidemics, climate change, and their effects on long-standing patterns of trade.[4] Meanwhile, those interested in the causes of civilisational development tend to point to technological innovation; beginning in pre-historic times with fire-making, the fashioning of handled tools, agriculture, the bow, the wheel and the log boat. Four hundred years ago Francis Bacon identified three transformative discoveries of western modernity: *printing* (allowing the wide dissemination of information and ideas), *gunpowder*

[4] See, for example, Ian Morris, *The Measure of Civilization: How Social Development Decides the Fate of Nations* (Princeton:Princeton University press, 2013).

(increasing the force of warfare) and the *magnet* (making possible the nautical compass): adding that "no empire, no sect, no star, seems to have exerted greater power and influence in human affairs than these". [5]

Important as these and similar things may be, they are generally either broadly material or technological and the narratives of decline or ascent to which they are applied are overly simple. They also omit, even if they presume, the influence of individual and social psychology in the ordinary sense of thought, emotion, desire and will.[6] The trajectories identified by material historians generally extend over centuries during which there were multiple cultural and social advances and reverses; and technology like skill itself is, as Plato emphasised when contrasting it (*techne*) with virtue (*arete*), almost always is a two-edged sword. He makes the point early on in the *Republic* with regard to medicine and martial skills, and in the *Phaedrus*, in relation to the invention of writing, then generalising the point 'To one it is given to create artifacts, and to another to judge what measure of harm and of profit they have for those who shall employ them'.[7]

In the seventeenth century during which Italy flourished through the utilisation of the trio of transformative discoveries, it also suffered two bubonic plagues resulting in the death of twenty percent of the population, and in other leading European countries overhunting and intensified agriculture diminished animal species and depleted soil fertility; and political and religious conflicts were intense. As populations grew and moved into urban centres, epidemics, conflicts and technological developments posed major challenges to which some responded with despair, while others sought constructive solutions. Among those proposed in the later

[5] *Novum Organon* in *The Works of Francis Bacon* edited by J. Spedding, R.L.Ellis and D.D. Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) Vol.4, Book I, CXXIX, p.114.

[6] On which see Susan Perry, A lecia Carter,Marco Smolla,Erol Akçay,Sabine Nöbel,Jacob G. FosterandSusan D. Healy 'Not by Transmission alone: the role of invention in cultural evolution' *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 376 (1828) 2021.

[7] Plato, *Phaedrus* trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 274-5, p.65.

modern period were a renewed investigation of human nature as a source of values and ideals and the development of toleration as a newly discovered virtue. Thus, were born both a-prioristic and empiricalist forms of rationalism and of political liberalism, further modified and developed through the nineteenth century, as by Bentham, Mill and other liberal utilitarians, and widely adopted by the cultural and political leadership of Western style democracies. In the past few decades, however, these have come under attack from two directions: externally from hostile elements in other cultures who do not share those philosophies, and internally from academic critics, social commentators, and now increasingly from insurgent political movements.

These various factors and forces increasingly bear down upon the practice of education particularly at secondary and tertiary levels and especially in relation to those aspects of curricula that concern human nature and conduct. There are currently two discernible and opposing trends. On the one hand, there is that which sees itself as continuing the project of liberation and empowerment by instructing students in narratives of class, cultural economic, racial or sexual oppression, and encouraging rejection of traditional moral and cultural norms in favour of new modes of self-realisation. On the other, is that which regards these self-proclaimed emancipatory projects as forms of ideological imprisonment destructive of the possibility of authentic understanding and of nourishing forms of personal and social life, and which proposes instead a project of cultural recovery and restoration.

As things stand, the ‘progressive’ trend begun in the mid-1960s and resurgent since the turn of the millennium remains dominant; but in recent times the ‘traditionalist’ one has developed in breadth and strength as indicated in the USA by the growth of the classical education movement through home schooling and charter and faith schools, as well the creation of liberal arts and western civilisation program(me)s in colleges and in universities. More significantly, criticism of the politicisation of education by ‘progressives’ and calls for a return

to responsible scholarship and teaching have begun to be expressed in leading educational fora such as the US *Chronicle of Higher Education*.[8] Given the wider political context across the democratic west, it is unsurprising that issues about the content and aims of education have become prominent themes in the 'culture wars'. This fact, however, is more distracting from, than enabling of the effort to think analytically about human nature, and constructively about whether some reasonable conception of it might serve to diminish such polarised opposition, and give grounds for optimism about the possibility of fashioning a form of humanistic education that might secure broad acceptance. This is my concern in the following sections.

III

The imagery of Constantine Cavafy's philosophical poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians' (1898) looks to an imperial age, perhaps that of Athens or Rome in the periods of their decline and fall, or of Byzantium a thousand years later. The backdrop is one of a troubled state and culture believing itself to be threatened with destruction from without but in reality collapsing from within, and we may assume that this reflects Cavafy's concerns about his own times. His contemporary W.B. Yeats likewise had the experience of living in an unstable and troubled society, and of seeming to oscillate between membership of the colonised and of the colonial class. Cavafy's Alexandria was a British run protectorate, while Yeats lived in a country that had been subject to English conquest and repeated suppression of its indigenous culture and language. Following the Dublin Easter Uprising of 1916 and the end of the First World War, Yeats wrote 'The Second Coming' (1919), the opening verse of which is oft quoted:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre

[8] See, for example, two articles from November 2024: William Deresiewicz, 'Academe's Divorce from Reality' *CHE* November 21 and Michael Clune 'We asked for it: the politicisation of research, hiring and teaching made professors sitting Ducks' CHE, 71 (7) November 29.

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.[9]

As with Cavafy's poem, the inspiration and deepest meaning of this work is a matter of some debate but, whatever other theme he may have had, Yeats was in part reflecting on the collapse of western civilisation as represented by the madness and barbarism of the Great War.[10] Things 'fell apart' in Berlin, Vienna, and St Petersburg, but equally Edwardian England 'fell apart', and the broad European sense of cultural and political progress and stability itself 'fell apart', as did the hitherto popular belief in a providential divine governance of the world.

Twenty years prior to Yeats's reflection on anarchy, and around the same time as Cavafy wrote of 'Waiting for the Barbarians', Joseph Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Sigmund Freud produced *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). The first explores the European presumption of its own civility and civilization, and its denigration of the native peoples of its empires, represented by imperial Brussels and the Belgian Congo, respectively. The central character (Marlow) says of the former '[it is] a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre', thereby recalling the words of Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees: 'You are like whitewashed tombs that look beautiful on the outside but inside are full of dead people's bones and every kind of impurity'[11] The hypocrisy at the heart of whiteness is partly in the rhetoric

[9] In *C. P. Cavafy, The Collected Poems* trans Evangelos Sachperoglou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) pp. 15-18.
[10] It is relevant to note that like Pope, Cavafy and Yeats characterised their respective poems as 'philosophical' and as intended to have universal significance, and they have been read as such. On Cavafy see Peter Mackridge's introduction to the *Collected Poems*, op. cit., p. xvi; and on the reception of Pope's Essay on Man among enlightenment philosophers see H. Solomon, *The Rape of the Text: Reading and Misreading Pope's Essay on Man* (London: University of Alabama Press, 1984).
[11] (Matthew 23: 27).

of ‘civilising the uncivilized’ where in reality the project is one of exploitation carried on through slavery and torture. Conrad’s message, however, is not that it is the people of the Congo who are civilized and their colonial master savages; for there is cruelty and barbarism on both sides. Rather it is the unwarranted presumption on the part of the Europeans that they are civilized people above and beyond savagery. The important truth for Conrad is that there is darkness in the heart and soul of all mankind.

Freud proclaimed that his approach to understanding human psychology was scientific, though Wittgenstein viewed it as just another kind of interpretative mythology.[12] In either event, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* he deploys techniques of translation which he claims reveal the existence of an unconscious mind, a cauldron of desires, passions and impulses that are suppressed and censored, but which return transformed into the themes and imagery of dreams. Again, the contrast emerges between the order of civilization and culture and an incomprehensible chaos, except, as in Conrad’s analysis, the latter is not alienated to the barbarous ‘other’ but is acknowledged to be present in all of us.

For Cavafy, the barbarians proved to be neither at the gates nor anywhere in sight. The the announcement of their approach was a convenient excuse for inaction on the part of an impotent political class. For Yeats, barbarity emerged from within civilisations in consequence of world-historical processes of which they were a part, and leadership was either wanting or threatening. For Conrad and Freud, the barbarians are not only within the whited walls of the imperial city, for barbarism itself lies within the souls of their inhabitants as in those of all human beings. How it got there is a further question but both suggest that it is a more or less permanent feature or possibility of the human condition.

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[12] See ‘Conversations on Freud’ in C. Barrett ed., *Wittgenstein: Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966): “He has not given a scientific explanation … what he has done is to propound a new myth. The attractiveness of the suggestion, for instance, that all anxiety is a repetition of the birth trauma, is just the attractiveness of a mythology” p. 52.

IV

We should take this last idea very seriously and see it as a pointing to a constraint on any account of how we might seek to establish and maintain comprehensive polities, and also of how we might hope to engage peacefully with those both within and outside those polities who hold seemingly quite different beliefs and values. The constraint might be termed that of recognizing the ineliminability of human frailty, fallibility and the propensity to moral disorder and destruction; in brief, the ineliminability of human weakness. Evidently this is a negative condition, and if it were all that experience and reflection give reason to believe in then there would be little hope of attaining benevolent order. The best one could hope for is some kind of Hobbesian social contract, granting power to a political authority established for the purpose of preventing and countering conflict. But it has a counterpart, a positive condition. Again, we know of this through experience and reflection but we can also derive it a priori, for the notions of frailty, fallibility, disorder and destruction are contrastive and privative ones. Each implies a positive counterpart: strength, correctness, order and creation, and each marks a lack of these. In other words, the negative terms are asymmetric to the positive ones. It is the latter that have priority of meaning. To be weak means to lack strength but to be strong does not mean, though it implies, not being weak.

This logical order suggests that, at least conceptually, our positive powers come ahead of our weaknesses, and the possibility that this really is so in the order of reality, and not just in the sphere of ideas, is strengthened by three further thoughts. First, that even when we believe falsely we take ourselves to be believing truly. Second, that even when we act badly we take ourselves to be acting in pursuit of some apparent good. This insight was summarised by the medieval scholastics in the formula that whatever is chosen is always done so '*sub specie boni*' – under the guise of the good. Third, that we have a great deal of non-theoretical common knowledge about what is conducive to human well being, and we can apply this beyond our

own case and that of our fellow citizens and cultural associates to peoples whose actions and ideas strike us as not only alien but brutish. The significance of the last point is that notwithstanding differences of language, culture and ideology, there are few, if any people or peoples whose lives we really cannot understand. The appearance of the living human form, sitting, walking, eating and so on, alone or with others, brings with it a set of expectations about what conduces to the good of such a person.

The first and second points, about aiming at the true and at the desirable, express the very nature of belief and of action; and other points follow such as that an enquirer and a deliberator have reason to be concerned with the honesty, sincerity and intent of others. For without them they cannot rely on testimony or conduct, and such reliance is a condition of a great deal of thought and action. Since each has reason to believe and depend upon others, so each has reason to allow others to believe and depend upon them. Recognition of the necessity of agential and epistemic co-dependency is an important element in building deeper and more extensive forms of co-operation.

The third point, about common comprehensibility, may be viewed in three ways. First, as a condition of the possibility of interpreting the practices and beliefs of even quite culturally alien peoples which we have been doing for a long time, certainly since Herodotus wrote his *Histories* in the 5th century BC.[13] Second, as an inheritance of generations of shared life and experience handed on in overlapping languages and practices, Third, as the responsiveness of one living thing to another deriving from them sharing a common nature. This last is the ground of the natural sympathy between human beings explored by Adam Smith in *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (1759), the clarity and potency of which is well illustrated in the opening passage of the work:

[13] The idea is a central feature of Donald Davidson's philosophy of language, mind and action, see Davidson, Truth, Language and History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

> How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. … [T]his sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous or the humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.[14]

V

Let me speak of 'the opposed other' who may also be an 'outsider' and even a moral and cultural alien to the extent that what they say and do seems incomprehensible (they may also be an aspect of oneself) - though in light of the previous discussion I will now say 'seems hard to understand'. Nothing in this specification implies that the 'the opposed other', is brutal or base. But the more alien they seems in their values, the less confidence one may have in the possibility of agreement, and the more one may then fear that the mutual pursuit of irreconcilable policies and practices may lead to aggressive conflict, letting loose anarchy and the blood-dimmed tide.

The immediate strategy for dealing with the latter is coercive restraint. How successful that may be is a practical issue, but it is unlikely to prove effective in the long term without an associated effort at persuasion. The question then is how such persuasion might proceed. Incentives (inducements and rewards) may be part of that strategy, but one would also hope to effect a change of heart and mind. In the case of 'oppositional otherness' what is called for are not policies of coercive restraint but methods of rational or affective suasion. And for those there are, I propose, two principal strategies, proceeding in different directions downwards and upwards, though they may be pursued jointly.

[14] Adam Smith, *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984) Part I, Section I, Chap. I, p. 9.

The first is the search for, and if found the display of common foundations. The second is the construction of respectful dispositions as fitting responses to facts of the human condition. For brevity I will term these 'foundational' and 'fellowship' strategies, respectively. The foundations I have in mind may be identified historically or philosophically. Which of these methods to prioritise is in part a matter of whom one is seeking to engage and persuade; but since the philosophical mode is in a sense a priori and aims at necessities it may be thought to be more universal in its reach. Let me begin, however, with the historical.

The cultures that were founded and developed around the eastern and north central Mediterranean sea gave rise to four kinds of ideational monisms: two theological and two philosophical. The first theological one is to be traced to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants (*Genesis* 12: 1-3, and *Exodus* 6: 3-7) and more generally in the scriptural Torah (*Genesis* to *Deuteronomy*). While Judaism may have developed the idea of monotheism by stages, it is in Hebrew scripture that the first comprehensive expression of the idea of there being a single creative, sustaining, governing divinity is to found. It is also a feature of that scripture, however, that this divinity's interest in humanity is focussed on a particular tribe: the Jews, God's chosen people. In Christianity the singularity of God is maintained. What is added, however, is a new covenant open to all humanity. Thus we read in Paul's letter to the *Galatians* (3: 28) 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus', and in the first epistle of *Peter* (2: 9) believers in Christ are told they 'are chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, people who belong to God. You were chosen to tell about the excellent qualities of God, who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'.

The present issue is not the truth of one or other (or both) of these theologies but the fact that at the foundation of western civilisation lie two related claims. First, that the diversity of things is united in their origin in a creative and sustaining source. Second, that this divine

source regards all humanity as equally open to its benediction and companionship. What this implies is spiritual universalism, which transposed into an ethical key gives something like the equal moral standing, considerability and value of all human beings.

The second pair of monisms may be related to the first but they have an independent foundation in pagan cultures, more specifically those of Greece and Rome. Western philosophy may have been constructed by the pre-Socratics, but the first and long-enduring set of resolutions was composed by Plato and Aristotle. Here I am only concerned with one: the rejection of the relativism espoused by the Sophists and the assertion of the unity and singularity of truth as argued for by Plato. The arguments are positive and negative, the latter involving the demonstration that the assertion that there is no non-relative truth is self-undermining, since it is precisely a claim to non-relative or absolute truth.

The final monism is, like the idea of the covenant, practical in its implication. It is the Roman legal doctrine that beyond the laws of individual cities and nations stands a universal law (of which, if reasonable, particular laws will be more or less remote expressions). The most famous statement of this idea comes in Book III of Cicero's *De Re Publica*:

> There is a true law, a right reason, conformable to nature, universal, unchangeable, eternal, whose commands urge us to duty, and whose prohibitions restrain us from evil. ... This law cannot be contradicted by any other law, and is not liable either to derogation or abrogation. … It needs no other expositor and interpreter than our own conscience..[15]

While western societies shaped under the influence of this four-fold foundation - one God, one Humanity, one Truth, one Law - have moved some distance from it, more in respect of some elements than of others, the fact remains that these ideas created values, virtues and ways of thinking that remain even when their historical bases are rejected. Additionally, much

[15] Cicero *The Republic and The Laws* trans. Niall Rudd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 69.

of the same four-fold foundation shaped Islamic societies which are generally less secularised, less sceptical and less relativistic. The relevance of these facts is that even where there is significant moral and ideological disagreement of a kind that can seem so deep and extensive as to make the prospect of any convergence seem impossible, mutual oppositional-others tend to argue in ways that presuppose one or more of these monisms, and typically at least those of one Truth and one Humanity.

But these ideas are barely less 'metaphysical' than those of one God and one Law, for in the former pair no less than in the latter the doctrines are neither empirically founded nor confirmed. There is nothing in the anthropological, psychological or physiological studies of human beings that will show some significant empirical respect in which all are equal, yet that is an article of faith for western non-religious liberals as much as for adherents of the New Testament, and the Q'uaran.

The foregoing provides one version of the first strategy for diminishing the sense of oppositional otherness. Set aside for the moment some particular matter of contention, and explore the form in which the disputing parties are committed as a matter of cultural inheritance to one or more of these monisms. In particular, most likely to be present even in those who reject religion, are the oneness of truth, of humanity and of natural justice: the Law beyond laws. There is, however, a further way of introducing the first and second, and also perhaps the third, of these monisms, now not as historical inheritances but as rational presuppositions of the very discourses in which disputes are formulated and expressed.

Consider again the refutation of relativism. It does not attempt to prove the absoluteness of truth directly but lets the non-relativity of truth emerge as a precondition of assertion. The relativist wants to say there is no absolute truth but saying it constitutes a pragmatic self-refutation of that very utterance. Likewise, the radical who rails against what he or she sees as socially constructed notions of justice, doing so on behalf of the unjustly disadvantaged,

presupposes a notion of justice as independent and transcendent of this or that conventional notion.[16] Again, disputants over such issues as abortion, euthanasia, and transgenderism find themselves required to invoke notions of human equality which on inspection look to be universalist in content, though as in the case of abortion or euthanasia there may be disagreement as to whether a given individual is a human being in the relevant sense. As before, where there is a sense of oppositional otherness with each side finding an opponent's values and practices alien, there is still the possibility of diminishing the difference by showing that each side is committed to a foundational set of values; and to that extent their dispute occurs within a framework of more basic agreement. In other words, neither really is, or can be an alien in relation to the other.

VI

The reflections of the previous section are bound to seem rather speculative and the conclusions somewhat abstract. They can be given greater specificity and brought to bear on particular issues and cases, but the real difficulty is in bringing disputants to the point where they might be willing to entertain this sort of conciliation. Certainly, it presupposes a preparedness to consider historical and quasi-logical reflections; and one might think that were there such a willingness then there would not be a sense of oppositional otherness in the first place. Matters are more fluid, however, and the oppositions are more of degree than of kind. In any event the second strategy appeals more to experience and imagination in order to elicit sympathy, rather than to intellect to yield conceptual universality. This second approach is what I earlier termed 'the fellowship strategy' involving the construction of respectful dispositions as fitting responses to facts of the human condition.

[16] The immediate or ultimate presupposition of that which is denied, and thereby the validation of central domains of thought in which this pattern occurs: language, logic, science and ethics, is explored clearly and compellingly by Thomas Nagel in *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

The expression 'the boundaries of humanity' is most commonly used to refer to the outer borders where on the one hand the human may (or may not) connect with non-human animals, and on the other with artificial intelligences. But here I am concerned with internal boundaries or limitations. The facts in question are of two sorts: *epistemological* and *existential*, concerning, respectively, knowledge and the conditions of human life. There are pressing intellectual and practical needs to achieve, and to share an accurate understanding of the nature of disagreement on moral, social, political and cultural matters. This is in part a conceptual task: understanding the nature of evidence and of the interplay between description, interpretation and evaluation; and the diverse nature of the inferential relationships between premises and conclusions in such arguments. Although it is common to deprecate the middle-ages as primitive and credulous, there is a feature of contemporary moral, political and cultural disputes that is best explained by attributing to the combatants a medieval conception of reasoning as *demonstration*. The latter is a proof in which the premises are known with certainty and the inference from them is deductively valid, so that the conclusion is also known with certainty. This understanding of proof has the merit of clarity, but it has few instances outside of mathematics and logic text books. Most substantial arguments are not at all like this, in part because they proceed by means other than deduction, for example by analogy or by extrapolation, and because the premises are not at all self-evident. [17]

[17] A further point relevant to understanding and accommodating contention and dissent is the issue of peer disagreement see T. Kelly, 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement', in T.S. Gendler and J. Hawthorne eds., *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Suppose two people consider an issue and review the same body of evidence regarding it. Further assume that they are equally competent at identifying and interpreting such evidence and engaging in relevant sorts of reasoning from it, and that they recognise this fact about one another. But then suppose that they come to different and even contradictory conclusions regarding the issue in question. Difference in judgement may perhaps be assigned to difference of focus or interest in one or another aspect of the issue; but contradiction with respect to a judgment is more problematic. Assuming there is a truth of the matter they cannot both be correct. Recognising their disagreement, the question then is what should be their attitude to their own judgements? Should such peer disagreement diminish their confidence in their original evaluations and inferences? Considering a situation in

In thinking about moral, social and political claims we cannot expect knock-down demonstrations, and so have to proceed more elaborately and patiently, recognizing that equally intelligent, equally well-intentioned people may disagree. We might distinguish being *rational* and being *reasonable*, but then we still have to show that some sets of premises and inferences are more reasonable than others. This is a matter of comprehensive reasonability – reasonability 'all things considered'. It is also in part a historical and socio-psychological task: understanding what factors have produced polarisation, what patterns of relationship have resulted, what factors tend to intensify or diminish the sense of intractable difference, intolerable disagreement and so on. When considering moral issues and social policy one has to bring into interplay: experience, sensibilities, historical knowledge, philosophical clarification, and so on. Inevitably there will be disagreements, but these are more easily accepted when there is a shared aspiration to discover a common normative grounding in objective truth. Recognising the fact of reasonable disagreement and cultivating a form of enquirer-friendship is important for democratic societies because their members hold to a diversity of political, religious or philosophical commitments.

Those who reject relativism or nihilism and believe that truth is one and indivisible need to be clear that these are features of the *objects* of judgement (the things about which judgements are made); and not treat the presumed errors of those (*subjects*) with whom they disagree as grounds for denigrating or alienating them. Respect for truth does not warrant disrespect for dispute or for opponents. On the contrary, it may encourage seeing in the other a shared concern to ground action in judgement and judgement in fact, and thereby provide for

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which disagreement of this sort is widespread a question arises of whether to cultivate agnosticism, or scepticism, or steadfastness. Here the issue is not just one of epistemology but again of social and educational philosophy. Grounded confidence in judgement about matters of practical importance has obvious value; but on the other hand, recognition of peer disagreement might be thought to warrant humility, reticence and the eschewal of judgement.

solidarity and fellowship. This leads in turn to the question of whether familiar notions of intellectual and moral virtue, such as are now commonly advanced by neo-Aristotelians, are adequate to accommodate the ideas of reasonable disagreement and of friendship or fellowship predicated upon it. What has been said above favours a degree of fallibilism and indeterminacy in judgement that some may view as sceptical or relativistic, but on the other hand it suggests an account of the character and circumstances in which we find ourselves and which we should accept are permanent features of the human condition.

VII

Reflection along these lines brings home the fact of human intellectual fallibility, not as a personal limitation but as a general one. This allows one to be less assertive in argument and to deflate the presumed certainty of an opponent, while recognising the symmetry of the situation. Each then has reason to moderate their claims and to develop a sense of companionship in fallibility that begins to approach, and may encourage, a kind of epistemic friendship and more general tolerance.[18] It also suggests an educational task of communicating an understanding of the foregoing and cultivating intellectual habits of rigour, impartiality and humility consonant with these. This could be done at different levels but I suggest giving priority to addressing, and producing materials for a) members of professional groups concerned with moral and social disagreements (commentators, journalists, policy makers, doctors, lawyers and teachers, etc.); and b) classroom use intended to develop virtues of clear thinking and mutual respect.

Here, it is important to take note of, and adjust to the realities of people's material, social and educational circumstances. Disagreement over policies and their implementations is

[18] In regard to these issues see the excellent essay by Jacques Maritain 'Truth and Human Fellowship' in Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy: Three Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

a feature of the lives of legislators, administrators and professional practitioners all of whom stand in relatively privileged positions. But their disagreements and associated advancements and reversals of policies have effects in the lives of others who are often, consultation exercises notwithstanding, unable or unwilling to play a role in shaping those policies or priorities. This raises issues of responsible leadership,[19] representation and democratic deficit but also ones of collateral or secondary conflict where people find themselves 'conscripts' in policy disputes of whose origins and meaning they may be ignorant.

This suggests that educational material or recommendations would need to be shaped both to the roles and to the degree of agency/patiency of intended audiences. Recognising the limits of rational argument to determine conclusions is disabling of those who presume the possibility of certainty and uniqueness in reasoning, but also empowering to those who may otherwise feel that disagreement implies that reasoning is not worth engaging in. The fact that it may not be possible always to show that reason determines a unique correct conclusion does nothing to show that there are not better and worse ones. Indeed, the notion of reasonable disagreement implies the reasonability (or rational warrantedness) of the positions in contest. I am therefore distinguishing this *epistemic* use of reasonability in argument, from the *psychological* disposition not to press one's (possibly non-rational) commitment in the face of opposition or resistance to it. In the latter sense one may be 'reasonable' with regard to a disagreement that is recognised *not* to be one between reasoned positions. Creditable as that may (or may not) be it is a different matter to the virtue of epistemic humility or epistemic toleration which I propose as a basis of mutual respect and where the matters concern social and political issues civic fellowship.[20]

[19] See J. Haldane 'Virtuous leadership: Ambiguities, Challenges and Precedents' *Metaphilosophy* 55 (4-5) 2024, pp. 566-581.
[20] In this connection see also J. Haldane 'Public Reason, Truth and Human Fellowship' *Journal of Law, Philosophy and Culture*, 2007; also J. Haldane 'Responding to Discord: Why Public

VIII

More fundamental than the facts of epistemological insecurity, however, are those of existential fragility. Human beings form a small part of the animal population, and notwithstanding the capacity for science and technology we live under conditions of considerable uncertainty with limited capacities to deal with potentially life-changing events and processes. For all the talk of progress and advancement, the circumstances and the continuation of existence are vulnerable to all sorts of threats and contingencies. Given these facts together with the capacity for, and tendency towards human sympathy, the most reasonable ethical stance is one of solidarity in the face of suffering and loss; and the moral virtues most necessary for cultivating and sustaining such solidarity are those of benevolence, compassion, empathy, mercy, patience and respect. Here again we may find wisdom in Pope's *Essay on Man*:

> Heav'n forming each on other to depend,
> A master, or a servant, or a friend,
> Bids each on other for assistance call,
> 'Till one man's weakness grows the strength of all.
> Wants, frailties, passions, closer still ally
> The common int'rest, or endear the tie:
> To these we owe true friendship, love sincere,
> Each home-felt joy that life inherits here;

There is, however, one last consideration. I have not said anything about Yeat's oft-quoted lines: 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity'. The latter may seem to describe the fanatics within and beyond society, but if we think Yeats is correct about that, what of his judgement of the 'best'? Like Cavafy he may have been commenting on a failed leadership class, but more probably was focussing on those who, though decent, had been rendered powerless by doubt about their values and the means of

Reason is not Enough' in J. Arthur ed., *Virtues in the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Civic Friendship and Duty* (London: Routledge, 2018).

defending them. What I said in the previous sections about recognising cognitive fallibility may therefore seem to be an endorsement of such doubt, and hence a further impediment to action. But the fallibility I pointed to is quite general and not intrinsically disabling of one party to a dispute rather than another. It also must be set alongside the potential of the first strategy, that of displaying the common intellectual and moral foundations that are to be found in the historical or logical presuppositions of the very arguments whose occurrence is found debilitating. Once again, the challenge is in the implementation; but unless that is addressed there is a greater danger, not of increasing loss of conviction but of social and cultural disintegration and of becoming 'opposed-others' to ourselves. In writing that "If we know ourselves then we might know how to cultivate ourselves; but if we don't know ourselves, we'll never know how" Plato linked self-knowledge and virtue,[21] but he did not conceive of this conjunction independently of the roles of others as agents of character formation through instruction and dialectical engagement, hence his considerable interest in education, which for the same reasons should be our interest also.

[21] On what self-knowledge is knowledge of and on the means of acquiring it see J. Haldane 'Knowledge of Oneself and of Others: Aquinas, Wittgenstein and Rembrandt' *Philosophical Investigations*, 45 (4) pp. 388-413.