

April 18, 2002

LEVEL: 5

[Forematter]

Introduction

[URL: Introduction]

SECTIONS:

- I On the Purpose of This Work and the Basic Problem It Addresses
 - II How This Work Is Organized
 - III On the Justificatory Logic of this Work
 - IV Habermas and Me
 - V On Some Peculiarities of My Writing
 - A Lots of cross-references and lengthy footnotes
 - B “Wrong Way:”
 - C Quotation Marks
 - D Citations [Lack of]
-

I On the Purpose of This Work and the Basic Problem It Addresses

My purpose in this collection of essays is to show how to produce a just political and social structure. I do this by describing a fundamental way of relating to others that can be put in practice, now, in everyday life, by everyone. No grand philosophical apparatus is required; everyone has the capacity to put it into practice. My description of it is as straightforward and non-technical as I can make it, although probably not straightforward or non-technical enough. I came to this place by battering my way through a lot of philosophical and emotional shrubbery, and so even though I'm here, I'm also covered with a lot of branches, leaves, vines, and burrs from my journey. I just hope that I'm still recognizable under them all and, more important, that I can still clearly describe what I see through them.

The basic theme of this work is that in the absence of moral certainty, the only thing we really know as we work out how we'll get along with each other is how we've treated each other

in working it out.¹ It is not the rightness of one's position but rather the quality of this relationship that is the central issue of morality and social justice. Political/social/philosophical theories help us think about the issue, but they are still only aids, not resolutions in themselves.

What insight can ignorance possibly yield into the weighty problems of ethics and morality? Well, it serves the purpose of shifting our attention from specific theories and solutions – seen as uncertain at best – to an attitude about relating to each other. That attitude, I will argue, is that we must see each other as fellow inhabitants of a common moral universe, that even in the midst of our disagreements there is still a fundamental commonality to which we can orient. This attitude is not a specific political/social/moral doctrine or even a way of guaranteeing that we find a way of relating that all can accept. True, it suggests some political/social/moral doctrines (as we will see later), and true, people with this attitude are more likely to find a mutually agreeable way of relating (and to be happier even if they don't get their way). But its primary function is to *discipline* our dealings with each other. It keeps us oriented to the central problem that our specific interpersonal arrangements seek to solve – particularly when political/social/philosophical theories threaten to be taken as real solutions. A distant, ever-visible, and yet possibly unreachable goal, it guides us even when we can't see how to reach it. Everyone is capable of this attitude, even if that capability is obscured by pain, bad examples, and cultural beliefs. And so even if we can't figure out a universally agreeable way of living together, this attitude allows us to remain in a human relationship with each other even in the midst of

¹Notice the term, “certainty”, which I use specifically in light of Oliver Wendell Holmes's dictum, “Certitude is not the test of certainty” (Holmes 1918). It's easy to feel that we are right – to feel certitude; it is impossible to *be* certain. There can be no deductive proof of any moral position. I discuss this central point in the next section and in the first essay in Chapter 1 under the rubric of “the Münchhausen Trilemma”.

conflict. The simple knowledge that we do share the goal, and our simple actions in reaffirming it in ourselves and each other, provide us with a solidarity and sense of meaning despite our temporary disagreements and discords.

But this attitude isn't all sweetness and light; we take on some difficult things when we adopt it. Adopting this attitude means giving up all claims to final rightness. Adopting it means loving people despite one's emotional reactions to them – and seeing this love as a way of healing oneself of the reactions, not seeing the reactions as a way of healing oneself of those people. Finally, its adoption means taking up a sense of the world that cannot be directly, empirically proven – in fact, giving up empirical proof as the sole basis of knowledge. I'm not talking about blind faith, however, but about a worldview that makes sense, even if there is no direct proof of it, even if there's nothing I can directly lay my hands on as proof.

These are uncomfortable things, at least at first glance. I hope to show straightforwardly that these things should be accepted – “should” in the sense that they simply conform with the inherent nature of the world. To do that, I need to explain the cost of not accepting the perspective. Denying the perspective may seem more comfortable than accepting it, but such denial carries its own cost. Because this cost is usually not recognized, people choose a false comfort, not understanding that many of the problems afflicting them come from that very choice. I hope to show how the choice and the problems are connected, so that acceptance of this perspective seems less like a blind leap into the abyss and more like a reasonable choice between two complex and uncertain alternatives that our complex and uncertain world offers us.

II How This Work Is Organized

I explain this attitude and the nature of the world in terms of relationships at three levels. At the most immediate level, presented in Chapter 1, I discuss our internal psychological organization in terms of relationships among “personas”, aspects of ourselves oriented to particular Goods. Authenticity (or mental health, in another language) consists in the reconciliation of these personas, even if only to their mutual reconciliation to the conflict among themselves. At the next level, presented in Chapters 2 and 3, I discuss face-to-face relationships among people, the domain of interpersonal morality. Because conflicts can be worked out face-to-face among the people affected by the proposed norms, these relationships need not be mediated by formal constructions, institutions, ideologies, and the like. At the final and most complex level, presented in Chapters 4 and 5, I discuss relationships among people who cannot work out their arrangements face-to-face – not because they are unwilling to, but because there are simply too many people involved, at too great a distance from each other, with their interests, abilities, and concerns too specialized, for face-to-face interactions to solve conflicts in practice. This is the domain of social justice, of relationships mediated by formalized, institutionalized, of-necessity-clumsy norms. At each of these three levels I differentiate between what reconciliation means (Chapters 2, 4, and the first three essays of 1) and how we are to deal with situations in which reconciliation and agreement are not achieved (Chapters 3, 5, and the last essay of Chapter 1). In the final three chapters of the book I apply the perspective presented earlier: to social science and its methods (Chapter 6), to a range of current social issues (Chapter 7), and to the classic question, “What is to be done?” – how in general should we go about organizing or acting so as to make the ways of relating perspective more widely understood and accepted (Chapter 8)?

This is an account of morality, also its siblings authenticity and social justice. It is perforce my account, and in the end my account of myself, but I also hold it to be an account of you. So while this work contains many examples taken from my life, it is not autobiography or theoretical narcissism. My purpose is interpersonal, not solipsistic: the final test of what I say here is whether *you* – and all others – recognize yourself.

III On the Justificatory Logic of this Work

True words aren't eloquent.
 Eloquent words aren't true.
 Wise men don't need to prove their point.
 Men who need to prove their point aren't wise.
 — Stephen Mitchell (19xx:Chapter 81)

Can I prove any of this to you? No. Can I even, for that matter, prove any of this to myself? No. But is there enough circumstantial evidence in my own experience and the experience of others so I may trust in the propositions I have mentioned, even trust them enough to bet my life on them? Yes. I have bet my life on them. If I were beginning my adult years again, I would bet my life on them again....

Again, I want to stress that I am not attempting to separate any of you from beliefs that have enriched your life. If you have reached a state of relative surety about your central beliefs, you have my admiration and my blessing. But if you are one of the growing number of persons for whom rigid dogma is more a barrier than a help, welcome to the fellowship.

— Jack Good (2001:4)

While I was beginning work on this book, I was asked at a party to explain what the book was about. I said something to the effect that it started from the recognition that no one knows the Truth, that we are all fallible, and that it goes on from there to talk about how we are to relate to each other. One of the people listening then asked, "So do you think that your theory might be wrong?" Whether he intended it in this way or not, this question is of course a trap. If I say it can't be wrong, then I'm denying the very principle on which the book is founded. If I say I

might be wrong, then wherever the work disagrees with their own beliefs, people can dismiss it as simply my own partial, fallible viewpoint. So let me clarify here the justificatory logic of the work and thus the limits of its claims.

To start with, I'm not attempting a proof by authority. I'm not pretending to be an expert in the fields I discuss, even though I think I have some excellent insights into them. I'm not a psychiatrist, or an animal behavior specialist, or a neurophysiologist, or a cognitive development psychologist. I'm not even a philosopher or political theorist, at least not a formally trained one; I backed into these areas as a result of my original interest in political development. Nor do I hold myself up as an especially admirable person. Some people like me, some people don't, sometimes I like myself, sometimes I don't, some things I do are admirable, some aren't – and I can't really tell for sure which is which. Neither do I give – I don't even attempt to give – a deductive proof of my position. As I discuss later under the rubric of “the Münchhausen Trilemma”, no deductive proof exists that can logically command your assent. Where I can, I refer to empirical research that bears on my claims, but I do so not to prove some point but rather to help you follow my thinking, to let you better understand my perspective.

So what on earth *do* I do? What possible claim *can* I make on you, then? Well, my claim is simply that you will recognize yourself here – if not immediately, then upon reflection. I talk a great deal about myself and my own experience, but the point is not to make you become like I am but rather to illustrate, in personally relevant terms, the processes I see going on not just in myself but universally.² In this case, “universally” = you. I'm not trying to give an abstract theory

²Thus my frequent use of “I” does not mean proof by the authority of me but just that what I'm saying is my own testimony.

that can be proven to be universally applicable; all I'm trying to do is to give a theory that you – you, the person reading this – yes, *you* – recognize as an account of your own experience. Maybe you're not convinced that the theory is true for left-handed Uigur-speaking refugees in Peoria. Well, maybe it doesn't, but that isn't something either you or I can know; those folks have to speak for themselves. Their self-recognition is neither more or less important than yours or mine, but none of us can really speak for the others. If you don't recognize yourself, then at least in that respect the theory is wrong,³ and I must accordingly revise it (or perhaps even reject it entirely). So I'm not trying to prove anything to you; I'm simply presenting a perspective and seeing whether it makes sense to you – that is, whether you prove it to yourself.

IV Habermas and Me

It will be apparent how much I owe to Jürgen Habermas's work. Almost all of this perspective arose from my studying his work intensively, particularly Habermas (1979/1976, 1983a, and 1990/1983) and related exposition and commentary (Kohlberg 1984a; McCarthy 1978). Nevertheless, I am presenting this as my own work. First, my perspective is rooted in people's capacity for empathy, not for speech. Second, Habermas (personal communication) appears to disagree with my treatment of the "second moment", although I'm still not sure why. Third, this work did not come together until I stopped my preoccupation with whether I was agreeing or

³As with all such theories, a simple rejection doesn't mean that it's wrong. You may have misunderstood what I am saying; you may have particular emotional needs to reject it; you may not have thought it over long enough; etc. I don't mean at all to discount your response but merely to remark that any kind of experimental proof is subject to these problems. In the text itself, however, I am assuming that my work really has not spoken to your experience, at least in some aspect.

disagreeing with Habermas and instead simply asked myself what I wanted to say myself. Finally, as I said above, this is not a proof by authority (certainly not mine, and not Habermas's either) but simply a statement of how I see things. I am happy to acknowledge here my debt to Habermas's work without inflicting on him the responsibility for mine. I believe we're all talking about the same thing in the end, so my expressing it differently isn't a rejection. Binocular vision means better sight, not that one eye is wrong and the other is right.

V On Some Peculiarities of My Writing

As you will find (or may already have found), I use non-standard forms of writing in some situations. I list these below, explaining my rationale for each so that you can distinguish between my choices and my screw-ups. My criterion in using these non-standard usages is whether your increased comprehension is worth the labor of getting used to these forms. I hope you will agree with my judgments here, but at any rate you should know that I'm considering you, not just banging out my private language.

A. Lots of cross-references and lengthy footnotes

I use a lot of cross-references and footnotes, and not just for citation but also for the exposition itself. I do this because my argument is complex, multi-layered, and not given to the linear narrative form. Linear narrative is useful for presenting deductive arguments, but as I said above, this work is not based on such arguments. It presents an overall perspective, and one of the things about perspectives is that they are meaningful precisely because they see things in connection with each other. Hence the cross-references. Footnotes allow you to read the work

at the level you wish to, perhaps skipping all footnotes during the first reading and then dipping into them on subsequent readings where you have questions or objections and want to examine the argument in more detail. If I could – meaning if the publisher would let me and the appropriate word-processing / typesetting programs existed for the purpose – I would put footnotes in my footnotes, and even footnotes within those.

B. “Wrong Way:”

I suffer, perhaps quite irrationally, from a fear that some readers will go stampeding off in one direction when the trail goes in another, wasting a lot of time and energy, confusing themselves, and creating assumptions that are difficult to undo.⁴ Where this seems especially likely to happen, I put in a footnote that begins, “Wrong Way:”, just as highway designers don’t just mark the right way to go but at certain key junctions also mark the wrong way as such. I don’t mean to insult you by this, just as the “Wrong Way” signs on the highway are meant merely as a precaution.

C. Quotation marks

Influenced by APL, I use quotation marks to include only what is in the original text. Other punctuation lies outside. For example, this sentence illustrates my usage: did I really say, “Influenced by APL”? Here’s another: the second word in this paragraph is “by”. The usage may look strange, but that’s simply a matter of unfamiliarity. When you think about it, the current

⁴ “Be very, very careful what you put into that head, because you will never, ever get it out.”

— Cardinal Thomas Wolsey (1475?-1530)

custom looks strange too, with the quotation mark hanging way out at the end: “In this sentence I’m leaving the final period inside the quotation marks.”

D. Citations [Lack of]

This work took form over decades (back to 1968 at least), and as you will see, it covers a wide variety of topics. It is basically a perspective on Life, the Universe, and Everything, to steal Douglas Adams’s (19xx) title. There is much material in it that originated in other brains than my own, but at the time I encountered it, I had no idea that it would appear decades later in this book. I’ve done my best to track down the sources for the quotations and other ideas, but I haven’t gotten them all. I don’t believe in the ownership of ideas, but I do believe in stating my gratitude for previous work. If you will tell me the source of something I’ve missed, I will include it in future printings or editions of this work (if any) and on my web site. In any case, my lack of citations may make me a bad researcher, but it doesn’t affect whether the perspective laid out here makes sense.