

# Honor, Mercy, or Justice?

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What do we want out of life? Dramatic beginnings? Elegiac endings? Meaningful middles? A peacefully soporific honors talk? An exploration of honor's meaning? Meaning changes as we age. The young ask: What kind of life would be meaningful for me to live? Those who are somewhat older, burdened by extra weight, slower reflexes, and the inertia of years, ask: What kind of meaning can I find in the life I am living?<sup>1</sup>

Two fields shape my life as a teacher: philosophy, as an exploration of questions without final answers, and art, as an exercise in meaningful form. Philosophy may become a handmaiden to the natural sciences or a technical administrator socializing the young through value rubrics linking appropriate desires and objects. My favorite philosophy, in formal arguments or literary conversations, asks how we ought to live our lives. It dares young people to take responsibility for discovering who they might be and acting to create the world they want. It challenges adults with Hannah Arendt's wonderfully seditious observation: Education is where adults decide whether to take responsibility for the world they have created.<sup>2</sup> Some echo clean-hands Pilate: "We didn't do this. Everything is just as it has to be," citing alibi absolutes (god, scientific truth, public opinion, the economy, national interest, culture, human nature, licensing boards). Others accept Mikhail Bakhtin's responsibility for living with others in a human world: bequeathed to us, changed by our action and inaction, and passed on to the young who need freedom and knowledge to decide what they want the world to become.<sup>3</sup> Education is an anxiety-ridden enterprise because mortal adults worry: Will the young who must replace us sustain our way of life? No wonder so many buzz around education like angry hornets whose nest has fallen on the ground.

We honor each other by our presence in full regalia at today's academic potlatch. But what is honor when many proclaim the end of liberal education, restricting it to an elite leadership class the U.S. denies we have, and undergraduate grades have risen to new Lake Woebegone levels of American exceptionalism?

Jurij Lotman says honor originally meant the physical objects a warrior received for his actions in a raid. This honor-reward (an early "performance bonus") reinforced the leader's authority and set the group apart from others who did not share in the booty.<sup>4</sup> In heroic epics, warriors also had a different sense of honor, the virtue a warrior must have to receive not the physical rewards of victory, but the glory

of being remembered in song: win or lose. Homer's art honors both the pragmatic Odysseus and the tragic Achilles.

Romantic art sees honor in eternal beauty:  
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'<sup>5</sup>  
(Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn")

Keats now seems naïve. The insane carnage of modern history and our implacably sane alienation amidst the interchangeable commodities and branded institutions of consumer society have discredited all foundations. Czeslaw Milosz hopes beauty will save us, restoring our ability to choose between right and wrong, true and false. Our aesthetic intuition, our instinctive revulsion against the ugly, will return truth, beauty, and honor to a disenchanting world.<sup>6</sup>

How might truth, beauty, and honor be connected? We are representing animals. The human mind perceives and creates patterns that give meaning to our lives. Do we have an innate sense that some patterns are better than others? If so, we cannot find a logically binding proof of their superiority. Yet, even in mathematics, there may be things that can be described but not proved. Art might allow us to know what reason cannot prove. Language may contain the memory of a people. A story might contain a truth in the particular arrangement of its elements that can be neither generalized nor empirically verified. The battle between philosophers, merchants, politicians, scientists, and poets over this issue shows no sign of abating, although new forms of bottom-line hemlock have appeared, for "who wants poets at all in lean years?"<sup>7</sup>

Cultural history tells us the changing meanings of honor. Honor-reward became honor-virtue. Virtue changed from warrior courage (Homer) to intellectual excellence (Plato) to the ability to act nobly in a political community (Aristotle) to imitation of Christ's humility to the Protestant work ethic's social decorum and commercial endeavor, where monetary honor-rewards are the daily bread of honor-virtue. All emphasize character and a universal standard: One person's merit is greater than another's and should, in a just society, receive appropriate recognition through some form of honor.

Justice as a hierarchical correspondence between character, accomplishment, and recognition seems ill suited to a contemporary society that, perhaps paradoxically, claims to be a meritocratic democracy. Merit invokes the ideal Greek polis where status depends on citizens' tested excellences; modern democracy tends toward a relativistic egalitarianism in which individuals and "cultures" set and meet their own standards.

The warrior-band to which we belong mutes this tension by assuming science can identify individuals' genetic potential and true desires, while the free market ensures the allocation of honor-rewards to the fittest. Honor has shape-shifted to the liberal managerial class's rule-based and result-based ethics which replaces the elite liberal education of the past with efficiency rubrics and outcome charts (Max Weber's iron cage of rationality; Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*). Egalitarian liberal education feels morally obliged to de-emphasize the character development needed by free citizens of a republic, instead providing properly socialized consumers with the skill sets needed to fulfill their desires for a share of our new honor-rewards.<sup>8</sup> Sociologists tell us the American dream is a commercial aspiration, a web of desires, marketing infinite progress through ever-new products by joining consumers and producers in a self-sustaining flow: "Advertising advertises advertising."<sup>9</sup> Marketing markets marketing.

In such a world, the most radical move may be the most conservative: a return to honor-virtue, a nostalgic quest for beauty, a hunt for the trace of the true. But it would be self-indulgent to amass forces for a final war of C. P. Snow's two cultures (now three, including rational administration). Hasty links of honor and justice chain us to wars of ideology. Philosophy questions the links. Art's beauty and humor free us through precise mixtures of immediate intensity and ironic distance. Honor-reward and honor-virtue are not really opposites. We should not confine honor-reward to the applied social sciences and honor-virtue to an older humanist culture. Humanist traditions tell us to act in the world and take seriously the best techniques for knowing how the world functions. The most naïve empiricists know that science is a mode of human action based on the virtues of its practitioners. Mill showed utilitarian notions of happiness must distinguish between qualitatively different forms of pleasure, meaning identities, commercial dreams, and desires may be better or worse. In short, all the academic disciplines need each other. Such common insight, the traditional goal of liberal education, avoids the elite/egalitarian fight over honor-reward and honor-virtue. The good news is: The more we leave the past behind, the more it is uncannily with us; the faster we enter the future, the further it recedes into familiarly sublime utopian and dystopian visions.

Reading Mikhael Bulgakov's comic novel *Master and Margarita*, some Juniata students taught me justice is the work of the devil while mercy is the work of the incarnate God. In Dostoevsky's favorite Russian apocryphal text, the Mother of God sees the terrible torments of the sinners in Hell. Moved by the plight of those whom God has forgotten, she assembles all the saints to beg for mercy for the undeserving. God refuses, pointing to the nails driven into his son. The tears of the holy prevail; the worst sinners are given a few days of mercy each year.<sup>10</sup> What an unjust act. The tale was banned as dishonorable. Yet an undercurrent persists in Slavic thought: mercy, charity, and love are essential to human life. Honor is great; justice is necessary, but without *caritas* (Latin for "give a guy a break"), we cannot live.

Why did many intellectuals not take a stand against the great ideological evils of the last century? Milosz replied: fear of being called elitist, respect for social consensus, respect for “scientific” truth, love of power, disdain for the middle class.<sup>11</sup> He then contemplated a peasant family sharing a pot of tea while waiting to be evacuated: Was the man pouring the tea racist, sexist, homophobic, ignorant, subservient to power, unwilling to change his outdated farming methods, unable to pay for his children’s education, hostile to their advancing beyond his ways? Probably yes. But, did he and millions like him deserve what happened to them in the wars and genocide unleashed by honor-laden intellectuals in pursuit of justice? The answer is surely no.

So many questions: What do we want out of life: honor, justice, or mercy? What kinds? Are you, the honored among us, willing to take personal responsibility for having the humor and judgment to reconcile them in the daily uncertainties of life? Have we faculty prepared you for this task or joined Pilate’s clean-hands club, swimming with killer whales, who, as Wisława Szymborska reminded us, have perfectly clear consciences?

“In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself”

The buzzard never says it is to blame.  
The panther wouldn’t know what scruples mean.  
When the piranha strikes it feels no shame.  
If snakes had hands, they’d claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn’t understand remorse.  
Lions and lice don’t waver in their course.  
Why should they when they know they’re right?

Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,  
in every other way they’re light.

On this third planet of the sun  
among the signs of bestiality  
a clear conscience is Number One.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Schmitz, David. “The Meanings of Life.” *Robert Nozick*. Ed. David Schmitz. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. Schmitz, David. Personal site. 2010 <<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~schmitz/research.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, Hannah. “The Crisis in Education.” *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Viking, 1968. 173-96.

<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Trans. Vadim Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas, 1993. And Morson, Gary Saul, and Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990.

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<sup>4</sup> Lotman, I. M. «Об оппозиции 'честь'/ 'слава' в светских текстах Киевского периода.» *Тексты советского литературоведческого структурализма/Texte des sowjetischen Literaturwissenschaftlichen Strukturalismus*. Ed. Karl Eimermacher. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1971. 339-51.

<sup>5</sup> Keats, John. "Ode on a Grecian Urn." *The Complete Poems*. Ed. John Barnard. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1976. 344-46.

<sup>6</sup> The beginning and end of Milosz's poem "One More Day" are a challenge both to consumer satisfaction and intellectual sophistication.

Comprehension of good and evil is given in the running of the blood.  
In a child's nestling close to its mother, she is security and warmth.  
In night fears when we are small, in dread of the beast's fangs and in the terror of dark rooms,  
In youthful infatuations where childhood delight finds completion.

And should we discredit the idea for its modest beginnings?  
Or should we plainly say that good is on the side of the living  
And evil on the side of a doom that lurks to devour us?  
(...)  
According to the nature of our bodies, of our language.  
(...)  
And though the good is weak, beauty is very strong.  
Nonbeing sprawls, everywhere it turns into ash whole expanses of being.  
It masquerades in shapes and colors that imitate existence  
And no one would know it, if they did not know that it was ugly.

And when people cease to believe that there is good and evil  
Only beauty will call to them and save them  
So that they will still know how to say: this is true and that is false.  
(Milosz "One More Day")

<sup>7</sup> Hölderlin, Friedrich. "Brod und Wein/Bread and Wine." *Poems and Fragments*. Trans. Michael Hamburger. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980. 242-53. P 251.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Nussbaum has been one of the clearest voices resisting this trend. In such works as *Cultivating Humanity; A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*; and the recent *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, she has argued that a narrowly vocational emphasis threatens the health of our democracy and the world because both individual well-being and civil discourse depend on an active, liberally educated population. Her work, Amartya Sen's writings on development and justice, and Kwame Anthony Appiah's ideas on cosmopolitanism and identity have had a strong influence on this talk.

<sup>9</sup> McGrane, Bernard. Interview. "Spreading the American Dream." *Mad Men. Season 1: Disc 2*. Perf. Jon Hamm, Vincent Kartheiser, Christina Hendricks, Elisabeth Moss. Lion's Gate. 2008.

<sup>10</sup> "The Descent of the Virgin into Hell." *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*. Ed. and Trans. Serge Zenkovsky. New York: Dutton, 1974. 153-60.

<sup>11</sup> These comments are found in his essay on the reactions of intellectuals to Stalinism. The English translation of the title *The Captive Mind* loses the subtle implications of the Polish title which has a root meaning of the mind which has lost its will. Milosz is interested not in the force used against intellectuals but in the many social and cultural factors that cause them to lose the will to defend the values and tradition that have shaped them and whose inherent worth they understand. He saw the same trend in the naked pressure of Stalinism and in what he perceived as the more subtle social pressure and

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mockery of the American universities where he taught in emigration. Milosz, Czesław. *The Captive Mind*. New York: Vintage, 1990. ---. "One More Day." *New and Collected Poems 1931- 2001*. New York: Harper Collins, 2001. 418-19.

<sup>12</sup> Szymborska, Wisława. "In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself." *Poems: New and Collected 1957-1997*. Trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998. 168.