Cruelty, Irony and Justice

by Mason Olds

> What is needed in a world that has far too much cruelty, pain, and suffering? How can we be inspired to become more autonomous and less cruel when appeals to a supernatural authority no longer works for us? … I … suggest that some sources of inspiration for Unitarian Universalist ironists are intelligent and sensitive plays, novels, and TV scripts. We need fictional works that reveal how particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people. We need works that exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain experienced by another kind of people. Such woks my assist us in noticing what we have been doing in our private efforts for autonomy, that has caused us to be unaware of the pain and humiliation we cause others—especially those near and dear to us.

There are many Unitarian Universalists today who view their existence in terms of time and space. They do not find an appeal to norms in a supernatural realm beyond history very convincing. This is the case whether the appeal is to abstract "forms" of truth, justice, and beauty in a Platonic metaphysical world, or whether the appeal is to a divine being in a heavenly world. Nor do they believe that moral norms can be derived from nature, for nature is ambiguous. It is both supportive and destructive. In fact, much human effort is devoted to improving the imperfections of nature.

These Unitarian Universalists of whom I speak are earth-bound and live in history. They interpret their present as both a part of an historical past and as a connection with an historical future. They see past actions that they approve and other actions they disapprove. They attempt to make decisions now, which they hope will create a better world in the future.

Who are these Unitarian Universalists? I borrow my minimalist definition from Richard Rorty, who says in a different context "liberals believe that cruelty is the worst thing that we do." [1] Thus, many Unitarian Universalists are those who accept this principle and wish to reduce the amount of pain and suffering in the world. Yet, they are not only liberals, but they are also ironist in that they agree with Rorty when he contends "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstances." [2]

I.

Let us now consider how the principle about cruelty relates to the private and public spheres in which we live. The language of the private sphere refers to each of us as a unique individual. It is an area of our lives that is unshared and frequently deals with self-creation. In the private sphere, we need not speak the language of the tribe. We may seek to find our own words, and realize that we have responsibilities to ourselves. It involves making decisions about who we are, who we wish to be, and how we can reach

our goal. It is an area that is not suited for argument. Some people have become what others wished them to be, married someone whom others have chosen for them, and done things which others pushed them into. Occasionally, such persons do not like what they have become, so they change directions and recreate themselves.

Jean-Paul Sartre, an advocate of existentialism, was especially concerned with the significance of the solitary individual. He also was a liberal ironist in the sense that I am using the term. He repudiated both philosophical and religious metaphysics. His disdain for metaphysics was so strong that he denied there was any such thing as human nature. This is evident in his notion that "existence precedes essence." In other words, when people are born, there is no predetermined script that they must follow. They are a kind of nothingness who must decide whom they wish to become. They are both the scriptwriters of their own lives and the actors who follow the script. (To follow a script of another is to engage in bad faith.) They view the life of an individual as projecting goals and then striving to reach them. It is in this striving for these freely chosen goals that they exist. So human existence is a never ending process of projecting one project after another and seeking to realize it.

Individuals then are the heart and center of their own transcendence. Such a view of human existence implies that the individual is free. Of course, freedom is not absolute, for one is a being in the world, has to work, and die there. Nevertheless, acknowledging these constraints, an individual is responsible for the kind of person she or he becomes. If one is cruel and uncaring, one has created oneself into that kind of person. Sartre says, "Man is nothing else than what he purposes, he exists so far as he realizes himself, he therefore is nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is." [3]

Many contemporary Unitarian Universalists, like Sartre, are ironists. They have values such as "cruelty is the worst thing that we do." But, unlike the conservatives who appeal to a religious or philosophical metaphysics, the UU progressives cannot prove, for instance, "that it is better to be kind than to torture." Although they may not be able to provide moral facts, they still believe this principle quite strongly and intend to abide by it. They can only affirm it and hope that others will be attracted to it. Like Sartre, the UU ironists have abandoned the notion that their core beliefs and desires refer to something beyond the reach of time and chance. They have the conviction, without a metaphysical foundation, that suffering should be diminished and the humiliation of human beings by other human beings should cease.

II.

Let us now consider the public sphere in which we live. In this sphere we employ the language of the tribe and are concerned with such concepts as justice and fairness. The public sphere must be shared with others, and deals with issues about which we can disagree. Here we often engage in argumentative exchange. In public discussion, we become aware of the failure of our institutions and practices that we as a people have not lived up to. At times our structures are unfair, as in the cases of slavery and the denial of women's suffrage. At other times the structures are fair, but we do not live up to the guidance provided by them; racial and sexual discrimination are instances of these. So, unfair structures or our failure to live up to the requirements of fair structures cause others pain and suffering. Unitarian Universalists then believe that we have responsibilities beyond ourselves.

John Rawls is the author of a significant book entitled *A Theory of Justice*. [4] As the title suggests, he is concerned with the public sphere. Also, Rawls is an advocate of the social contract theory of society. In it, he construes a situation that he refers to as "the original position." It represents a hypothetical point when people are moving from a "state of nature" to a state of civil society. When they come together to deliberate the terms of the political and moral contract under which they will live, they pass behind a hypothetical "vale of ignorance." In other words, the participants do not know such things as their future social position, intelligence, attractiveness, and presumably sex, race, and personality. At the same time, they are instructed to create a social contract that will serve their self-interests. The implication is that what is good for one will be good for everyone.

Rawls is convinced that after participants have discussed the various theories of justice, they will choose a theory of justice as fairness. His theory includes two principles. The first is that each citizen has a right to the most extensive basic liberties compatible with the same liberties for others. By basic liberties, he means such things as the right to vote, to be eligible to hold public office, freedom of speech, the right to hold personal property, and so on. These liberties are to be as extensive as possible.

The second principle is that social and economic inequalities are to be so arranged that they provide "the greatest benefit to the least advantaged." Obviously, the first principle deals with basic duties of citizenship, similar to our Bill of Rights, and the second deals with income and wealth, as well as making explicit that positions must be open to everyone. Rawls is not advocating that income and wealth be distributed equally, but, if inequities exist, they must be so arranged that they are for the benefit of those who are at the bottom. A graduated income tax and affirmative action are the kinds of things he has in mind.

Rawls thought his theory of justice, when applied to both the structures and practices of a society, would be more just and fair, and would reduce the pain and suffering in the world. Also, the principle of justice as fairness does not have a metaphysical foundation. It is simply an agreed upon principle that a group might choose to govern their moral and political decisions. When asked, "why ought I to follow this principle?" Rawls' response was, given our history and circumstances "it is the most reasonable doctrine for us." Such a view reveals the ironic nature of his principle, and yet those who hold the principle believe it most firmly.

What is needed in a world that has far too much cruelty, pain, and suffering? How can we be inspired to become more autonomous and less cruel when appeals to a supernatural authority no longer works for us?

As we all know, television and literature can have a great deal of influence on people. I therefore suggest that some sources of inspiration for Unitarian Universalist ironists are intelligent and sensitive plays, novels, and TV scripts. We need fictional works that reveal how particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people. We need works that exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain experienced by another kind of people. Such works may assist us in noticing what we have been doing in our private efforts for autonomy, that has caused us to be unaware of the pain and humiliation we cause others—especially those near and dear to us. Other works may dramatize the conflict between duties we have to ourselves and duties to others.

We also need works that make a connection between our social practices and institutions, and how they harm others, *e.g.*, discrimination, poverty, and prejudice. We need to understand that some of the social practices we accept have made us less sensitive and more cruel. In other words, we need a sense of our connection with other human beings. We must move away from the kind of thinking that draws a firm line between "we and they." We must do this not only on the local level, but on the national and even international level. It is not so much that you believe what I believe, but you are suffering, and I am committed to reducing the amount of pain and suffering in the world.

Not long ago, J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* played at the Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, and it provides an example of the kind of literary work we need. It tells the story of the Birlings, a well-to-do upper middle class family celebrating the engagement of their daughter to a handsome young man of her own social class. An Inspector calls, interrupting the pleasant evening with the news that a young woman, Eva Smith, has committed suicide.

At the start, each family member assures the Inspector that there is no connection between him or her and the unfortunate woman. By the time the Inspector departs at the end of the play they do see a connection, and the audience does also. Two years earlier Mr. Birling had fired Eva for her involvement in a strike to secure a wage increase of three shillings a week for the workers. After securing a position as a clerk in an exclusive women's shop, Sheila Birling, the daughter, who was having a bad day, had Eva sacked because of jealousy about how well Eva looked next to a dress that did not look good on Shelia.

Not being able to secure another job, Eva took to the world's oldest profession, and was picked up in a bar by Gerald Crofts, Sheila's fiancé. He set Eva up in a lover's nest for a few months. But she returned to the streets when the affair ended, and was picked up in the bar by Eric Birling, Sheila's brother. Eric walks Eva to her room, and in drunken state forces himself on her, and then takes up with her for a spell, with the result being that Eva becomes pregnant. When Eva goes to a social agency for aid, it so happens that Mrs. Birling, the mother of this family, chairs the committee dealing with such problems. Eva is denied help because the mother thinks that the young man should assume responsibility, not realizing that the culprit is none other than her own son.

At the beginning of the play the family appears close, happy, and good mannered, but by the end they see themselves and we see them too as rather selfish, self-centered, and not very likeable. And each comes to an awareness of his or her own involvement in the young woman's suicide. In speaking to his mother, the Eric says, "then—you killed her! She came to you to protect me—and you turned her away—yes, and you killed her—and the child she would have had, too—my child—your own grandchild—you killed them both—damn you, damn you —" [5]

Yes, cruelty is the worst thing that we do, and often we do not realize our own cruelty, until another makes us aware of it—or a play like An Inspector Calls nudges us to inspect our own lives a little closer.

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 74.

2. *Ibid.,* p. 189.

3. Jean-Paul Sartre, P. Marret (trans.) *Existentialism Is a Humanism,* London, Methuen Publishers, 1974 (from a lecture delivered at Club Maintenat in Paris, 1946)

4. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

5. J. B. Priestley *An Inspector Calls*, Oxford, Heineman Educational Publishers, 1993 (new edition).