

## THE GOOD IN THE WORLD

To read the newspapers or watch TV news one might easily conclude that the world was dominated by evil and by bad things happening. But, as somebody has said, that is what is news. The fact that those things are news is itself proof that they are the less common occurrences. They are not what is normal, they are not what goes on most of the time for most of us. Bad things are not happening to most people most of the time or it would be news to report when something good happened to somebody. The world is not full of bad people doing bad things most of the time or it would be news when somebody good did something good. Maybe it is fortunate that goodness is not news and predominates.

Of course we all know that, but the fact is that the bad news tends to distort our perspective at times. Indeed at times it gets us down. It results in people frequently sounding very pessimistic about human nature and about the world in general. We talk as though things were generally pretty bad and that there isn't much hope for the world or for people being decent. It pays to get our perspective corrected. And it may be corrected by our pondering some things that we really know already. If the better things were to dominate our thinking and our talk about people and about the world, the news would not dismay us so much, and we would have a rosier view of everything. Indeed we would have a more nearly correct view of things.

Just ask yourself how many decent people you know, and how many you know who are really bad eggs for whom compassion is needed but is difficult. It is a safe bet that most of the people you know are indeed pretty good people. Most of them are in families where life is fairly normal. That is, family members get along well with each other most of the time, not without any friction, but much of the time with mutual helpfulness and love. Sometimes the love is not demonstrative, but even so there are times when it is apparent that it is very real nonetheless. Most people have some friends, and the fact that the friendships are not only possible but persist is evidence that the people involved are all likable people. In their relations with strangers they are usually polite. We are in that sense a civilized people. Most people would not cheat or steal; they would not generally lie. They almost certainly consider themselves as good law-abiding citizens. However, for a variety of reasons, they may not always vote. Most of them believe in a God. And parents usually try to bring up their children to be good.

With a rapidly changing economy, many good workers have to look for different jobs. But most people do continue to hold their jobs as long as

the firms that employ them are profitable. That means that they probably are fairly good reliable workers. Just think what it takes for an economy, as complex as industrial economies are, to function at all. Almost everyone has to do their part to keep the thing going. If reliability was the exception rather than the rule, the whole system would break down. One would never know whether it would be possible to buy what one needs or not.

Indeed even for many a business transaction, if one had to specify in a written and legally binding contract every detail of what each party is obliged to do in the transaction, business would break down because of the cumbersomeness of the contracting process. And if it required force or even law enforcement to get people to honor contracts, the economy would break down because there would not be enough police or judges to enforce every business contract. To be sure, we do need lawyers to sue to enforce some contracts. But only an infinitesimal percentage of business transactions involve serious disagreements or are not satisfactorily and voluntarily honored. We know what it is like when law and order break down and looting becomes widespread. The point here is that although there are too many people who can resort to such behavior under certain circumstances, most people normally carry on very differently without a policeman at their backs. They believe they should and they can also count on most other people behaving honorably.

The simpler economies provide fewer opportunities to act in anti-social ways. Agriculture dominates pre-industrial economies and has a basic role in every economy. Farmers have always been considered exemplars of the simple human virtues. Examples of farmers pitching in to help one another when a barn burns down are proverbial.

So all this says we are not such a bad lot after all. Some people do some terrible things, and when they do, it is news. There is an untold and untellable amount of goodness in people. Most of what is going on all the time in the world is people being reliably good.

Indeed the way people react to the news of bad things happening to other people is not to rejoice and gloat over the misfortune of others. Quite the reverse, it dismays them that such misfortunes fall upon others. Quite often it leads some individuals who can to do something to help those who need their help. When there is a widespread disaster affecting many people, there are often organized efforts to provide help.

So let us have less talk about how bad people are in general. Let us talk only about how unfortunate it is that some, and fortunately relatively few, people are doing terrible things.

As for natural disasters or accidents happening to good people, it

should be realized that most of our lives are not lived in mortal fear of a continuous stream of tragic events befalling us. It is news when such things happen. How much better life looks when our perspective on it is not warped by the news media's focus upon the unfortunate events. To be sure, almost every life has its disappointments, its sorrows and its pain. For many life is very hard indeed. Whether things are getting better or worse for many is another matter. The extent of human flexibility and fortitude in the face of adversity can but evoke admiration & compassion. All this should be considered as well as the evil deeds that are news.

What is better news, and again is news because it is not so commonplace, is when some people do outstanding good things. We properly admire those who excel in some department of life. To be sure, we are not always as wise as we probably ought to be in choosing who to consider a hero or heroine in terms of what it is in which they excel. Some people develop superior skills that they use in ways that are of great value to others. We cannot calculate the benefits to society that arose from the work of some inventors, but we properly recognize them enough to know what a debt we owe to such people as Thomas Alva Edison. Great composers put us all in their debt in another way, as do great artists, some of whom bring us the beauty they create on canvas, while others lift our spirits with the beauty of their performance of music.

If we look at history, it is amazing what mankind has accomplished at times and over time. Our technology is the result of people putting their minds to the invention of better ways of making things and doing things. The results are cumulative. We benefit from the improvements made earlier. And we start from there to make further improvements. No one person should get all the credit for a new technology they develop, because that person started by figuratively standing on the shoulders of those predecessors who had brought the technology to a point just one step short of where the latest innovator takes it. What we properly admire in the achievements of earlier periods of history is not only their progressive advancement of the technologies which make life easier for us, but such things as the impressive cathedrals they built and their other great works of art. We have inherited also a body of literature from which much wisdom can be gleaned by pondering it, and much pleasure derived.

Indeed one of my regrets is that life is too short for me to manage to read all the great literature that I wish I had time to read. And I know that there is a whole lot of good music composed years ago that I will never have time to listen to and enjoy. I will not get to all the good plays that are still performed, let alone a lot that were good but are no longer staged. I have managed to get to only a few of the great cathedrals, and only a few of the

great art museums. I have heard some great singers and other musicians, but not all of them. The great good news is that there are more wonderful musicians coming along all the time. Every generation produces its own great artists. The arts really do enrich life.

Actually we all possess some creative powers if we but discover and develop them. And we can use them to our own advantage and to the advantage of others. Few of us can expect to be able to excel enough in anything to become famous, but fame is the wrong thing to seek in any case. We can become competent in the main things we choose to do in life, if we choose according to our potentials. And where we are competent we can also become creative. We can be more than machines, because we are more than machines. When we put our minds to anything in our realm of competence, we can usually come up with some creative variation in what we do or how it is done. Or we may get ideas of something different that could be done.

That person is mentally asleep who cannot see all sorts of things in society that could be better if changed in some way. We all tend to be somewhat resistant to change suggested by someone else, so the creative person who can really suggest something better does not always get a prompt hearing. But whether or not there is a prompt and favorable response, one has been creative and that is a very fine thing. That adds its own satisfaction to life. If in addition some persistence results in an improvement in something for the benefit of others, that is still better.

The term creativity is of itself neutral, though we often give it a connotation that means the result is favorable to others. But there can be such a thing as devilish creativity. Developing a more efficient way to mangle human flesh might be considered devilish creativity. The basic problem between human beings is to learn how to harmonize their activities, including their creativities, for mutual benefit instead of some trying to gain at the expense of others. The latter becomes a game in which both parties often end up worse off, at least worse off than if they had cooperated and developed real mutuality.

The wisdom about how to live, concerning which some things have already been said, consists at least in part in striving to develop and harmonize our own individual creativities with each other, and then to harmonize them with the creativities of other people. A social order, an economic and political system and a culture have evolved wisely insofar as they also tend to promote the development and harmonization of the creativities of individuals. That results in the greatest true satisfaction for

the society's members, and provides the greatest potential for achievements by the civilization.

But when all this is said, we have neither inherited nor created the best of all possible worlds, and some things have gotten worse while we improved other things. There is too much in the world that is not good, and not all but a lot of that might be remedied.

A better world for all is indeed possible. It requires that better values be held by people in some cases. It requires better attitudes in many. It requires in any case some better actions and behavior. And it may require some improved or better social institutional structures and social processes.

But, in general, people stumble along with whatever are their current headstrong attitudes, whatever the consequences, then blame the consequences on someone else or something else. Some people learn a bit, but few are willing to be taught anything that involves changing their ideas or attitudes. That is what is disheartening, although it is not news.

What might well be treated as good news is that there is such a thing as a better way. There is a way that harmonizes our creativities. The nature of reality is that the better is possible. There is something in us that pulls us toward that better way despite our inertia. Life rewards progress toward the better. Something in us knows what the better is, and can appreciate it the more we know of it.

There is much that is not good. There is much more that is good. There is the possibility of things being made better overall. And sometimes the better develops bit by bit. Anyone can help make a difference.

The better always starts with some changes in people's ideologies. That term means different things to different people. By a person's ideology I refer to all the ideas in a person's head, whatever they may be about, plus all the values they profess and all the values that actually help guide their lives (the two sets of values always overlap but are seldom completely identical), plus the varied emotional attachments the person has to different ideas and different values. Since every individual is unique, each person's ideology is likely to be somewhat different from anyone else's. But a family or any small closely knit group of people probably share large parts of their ideologies in common. Even a nation probably shares some of their ideologies in common or they would not be able to hang together as a single nation. Our ideologies largely govern our attitudes toward everything in life and lead to whatever actions we do take. Any society's cultural achievements are the are grounded in ideologies common in the culture or at least grounded in some people in the culture. At the same time, the social problems that persist at any given time in any society are also the result of

the ideologies widely shared in the society and in the institutions that it therefore produces and supports. Ideologies are complex and it is likely different aspects of an ideology that accounts for social progress and accounts for social problems. To leave our children a better world than that into which they were born, it may be necessary to change parts of our ideologies and resulting institutions that produce our various social problems. At the same time we need to keep and strengthen the parts of our ideologies and institutions that account for past and present good accomplishments.