

Dan Hassin
 Professor Brooks
 15 Dec 2015

Advice & Dissent

A: You know when you've just read a book, and for a while your entire outlook changes, you see the book in everything, think sentences from it... In some ways your own being changes and you assume the mind of the book; in some ways you stay the same and your whole world changes in reaction to it.

D: So what is it you've been reading?

A: Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*. It's given me more questions to think about than answers, but comfortably so. This question of hers stood out to me in particular:

Things flash up—little words, bad impulses, events alive with some kind of charge. Sudden eruptions are fascinating beyond all reason, as if they're divining rods articulating something. But what?¹

Makes me think of the terrorist attacks making the news recently. Almost as if we're given signs we can't seem to understand or know what to do with. Signs and meanings—such particularly human things, no? I don't suppose the birds contemplate earthquakes, or that gazelles contemplate their persecution by cheetahs. Nothing is personal for them because they possess no person. I know that's tautological.

D: Ah, and logic, such a human thing too. Maybe for humans, *both* sides are the cheetah, and both know that the other is rationalizing its evil. Both react to stake down their claim to 'goodness,' unwilling to relent it at their own expense. Nature may be indifferent to good and evil but we, humans, are not. Look to terrorism, racism, mass shootings, war—human conflict is not merely material, but also cultural and ideological. These human-instigated disasters almost aren't really caused by people, are they? It's not Darren Wilson vs. Michael Brown, it's whites vs. blacks, to name just one example. It's as if people get involved in serving as conduits to a greater power that then courses through them. I think Stewart is onto something with giving life, charge, and potential to the events she correctly calls eruptions—sudden outbursts of a suppressed energy.

A: Morality certainly plays an interesting role here, even if it's only a rather advanced cognitive adaptation on the same underlying principle of gene—or more fundamentally, meme—duplication (I take from Hitchens in seeing even the most important humans as nothing more than mammals). The locus of morality is said to be in individuals' behaviors, but it also collectively manifests social movements and events such as ISIS's attacks as well as other nations' retaliations and interventions, tracing back through the events of history to bring us

where we are now. Is it not the very life in those eruptive events she speaks of? It is the paradox of an abstraction that produces passion from a pitiless and apathetic nature.

D: I'm reminded of Robert Bly's *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* and its theory of morality that's acquired via internalized socialization (into one's 'bag,' or 'shadow')². An individual's morality is contingent on his or her upbringing, societal norms, and a bit of human nature. It's a cultural pattern, an adaptation as you said. Of course this morality isn't just arbitrary, it's useful—it's what lets us survive, and gives us means for interacting with the collective. But a *binary* morality isn't as useful. Bly deconstructs the false dichotomies of tolerance, intolerance, good, evil, happy or sad, namely by pointing out the incidence of those latter halves in most of our bags. Thus, seeing evil in the world functions as a mechanism for self-reflection. Whenever we see immorality in the world we see, in fact, a reflection of ourselves:

Our psyche in daily life tries to give us a hint of where our shadow lies by picking out people to hate in an irrational way... Suppose that [someone] hates the current president of the PTA; and if you ask her, she'll say that the woman is fakey, can't be trusted, is too successful, and so forth. The psyche might be telling her that part of her shadow lies in the power area. ... Hatred then is very helpful.³

A: To put it in Kathleen Stewart's terms, do the events we take to be of major significance then not serve to signal us of an impending threat to the goodness of the world but serve to point to a shadowed part of ourselves? Or to serve to reveal humanity's greater shadow—certainly humankind has quite a long bag for itself. I'm curious about this 'a bit of human nature' you mentioned earlier.

D: Whether there's something innate in humans which makes them strive toward the 'good' is a rather subjective matter, if that's what you're getting at. But undeniably human beings, as mammals, have certain innate proclivities. Kinship, security, and resources are all important. With cognition, kinship is blurred to include strangers, security expanded to satisfy mental needs. Desire for order, satisfaction, freedom from envy (or in its more common manifestation, superiority) are natural consequents. Is defying the drive for superiority, for instance, thus an overwriting of our nature? And do humans have a responsibility toward this end, as if their biological potential was inscribed as such? Or is the "selfless" category of goodness one that is localized to us as thinkers, and the jihadist's point of contention, for instance. Perhaps, for a jihadist, innocent casualties are sacrifices necessary to some transcendent end, or even that the act itself *is* selfless in the light of God.

A: And another question to add to the list: Is the decision to abstain from such a nature yet another form of superiority and undertaking in self-interest? In the context of Bly, this is making me feel like his argument is loaded in leading us toward this notion of "living a better life" (read: more 'good') by accepting the shadow that's within us. But this falls in the hands of yet another motive in escape of yet another shadow (that of *having* a shadow). Put differently, is 'eating the

shadow' not in denial of our shadow's own *shadowness*? It's as if overwriting our nature *was* in our very nature.

D: This question of nature interests me greatly. Marcus Aurelius, the second-century Roman emperor argues that one ought to align oneself with nature, that “nothing natural is bad,” and that we ought to follow nature's course in guiding our actions.⁴ I find the relationship between one's individual ‘nature’ and a more general, ‘collective’ nature rather interesting. Can we not follow the same principles that guide the gazelles and the cheetahs in human life?

A: I am skeptical of this claim. Do you realize how comfortably Aurelius says these words? It is quite easy to say that what *is* ought to *be* when one is the leader of the Roman empire at its greatest height. Do you think Roman slaves or peasants even have the freedom he presumes is available to perform the actions he was taught or cautioned against? For a more contemporary example consider James Baldwin. His brilliant polemic *The Fire Next Time* reveals precisely the implausibility of such claims for the poor and the oppressed. “People,” he says, doubting their natural potential for compassion, “are not, for example, terrible anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior.”⁵ Baldwin was born into a world that outright rejects him, his family, and others that share his skin color—is the natural state of affairs in this case the ‘right’ one?

D: Sure, I will grant you that the Roman empire was built on the backs of slaves and the fruits of the land they once called their home. Aurelius was certainly not the most moral, but does that discount the propositions in the *Emperor's Handbook*? Have you considered, moreover, that perhaps this state of affairs is a case of humans straying off the path of righteousness, that of nature? And as Aurelius states, nature has a way of restoring imbalances—such an imbalance can be corrected by natural action on the part of both whites and blacks. To that end, some will experience more hardships than others, some more pleasure than others, but nature is ultimately indifferent:

Nature would not provide for both pleasures and hardships were she not indifferent to both, and those who would follow nature and be of one mind with her must be indifferent when she is indifferent...By saying that nature uses these things indifferently, I mean that all things follow from one another in a sequence begun by the original impulse of Providence and continued in accordance with certain ordering principles and generative powers such as matter, change, and succession.⁶

A: Humans keeping to the path of righteousness—you dream like Dante! We've established that nature doesn't correct to anything “good” unless humans alter its course consciously, almost by definition (“good” being our own little project). Certainly then, our leaders cannot be guided by nature, not by much more than Aurelius was. It makes me question, in fact, if ‘natural order’ as you describe it has ever reigned on a human society on the planet. Amongst animals, on the other hand, as you brought up earlier, nature proves to be Hobbesian—nasty, brutish, and short. Yes, the emperor is precisely right; the natural order will restore itself only with “matter, change, and

succession”—as long as “matter, change, and succession” occur, and power changes hands. Trees must fall for others to grow; resources must be redistributed to a new generation with competitive potential—nature requires that power must be shared. Baldwin sees this clearly as a requisite in his world:

It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so—and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths—change in the sense of renewal. But renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not—safety, for example, or money, or power. One clings then to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope—the entire possibility—of freedom disappears.⁷

But, as he points out, our human nature clings to identity and steadiness: “Most people guard and keep; they identify with themselves what they are guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be.”⁸ Marcus Aurelius, for one, dominates and holds onto power as he continues to conquer, enslave, and plunder others in spreading the Roman empire. If this is the nature he refers to, is it one worth aligning with? If the current state of affairs—the power-hoarding we see in this country—is a deviation from the way of nature, when has it been any other way? Marcus Aurelius more so than anyone would insist on his right to keep his power—is this not utterly depraved behavior, and his book merely its justification and rationalization?

D: You may not have known this, but Marcus Aurelius in fact refused to become emperor unless his power was fully and equally shared with his adoptive brother Hadius, the first such occurrence of Rome’s shared rulership. Soon after his accession he provisioned for the support of poor children and allowed free speech, permitting comedies criticizing him.⁹ To respond to your questions, Aurelius’ view of morality is more nuanced than a monolithic normative ethic. *The Emperor’s Handbook* speaks of *duty*, a personalized ethic given to everyone (and everything) by nature. It is contingent on the individual, their society, and history. This is the same duty that compels Baldwin to dissent against his victimization. How could you not tell Marcus Aurelius to colonize and expand his empire’s borders and much as you would encourage Baldwin to continue fighting ‘the Man’? Although from each other’s perspective, the other is confidently wrong and unjust, by Aurelius’ principle both men are right by their nature. And do note that both men exude confidence, presuming a certainty of their case.

A: First of all, what a nice list of deeds you gave! I bet Aurelius fed a stray dog one day on the way to the palace too. You seem to have omitted the pillaging, enslavement, and eradication of homes Aurelius directed on the battlefield, of course under the guise of the Pax Romana. Second, the very dissonance between perception of morals in the world disqualifies any claim to a certain order. People without basic means cannot fulfill their own duty because the duty of someone else more well off is to marginalize them. I welcome the argument that nature is predicated on conflict, but in that case don’t call it ‘natural order!’ For instance, when white people’s “Faith,

Hope, and Charity” becomes Baldwin’s “Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror,” one wonders if attributing ‘order’ to this process is yet another tool of subordination.¹⁰ Once again I struggle to see this as nothing but the self-rationalization of the hoarding of power. Oh and let me ask you—would you also say that terrorists who cause atrocities are fulfilling their ‘duties’ and according with nature?

D: Now you’re belittling and patronizing Baldwin’s case! Maybe you’ve identified white people’s shadow with regards to their projection of evil onto blacks, but it seems to me like you’ve escaped your own shadow by occupying their skin, like we spoke about before. Yes, duties inevitably collide. Just as Arjuna cannot neglect battle (nor can the *battle* be neglected) in the Bhagavad Gita, our president today can’t simply abstain from engaging with the world. A world peace agreement won’t simply fall into everyone’s laps, even if it was what everyone wanted. You ask whether it is within the duty of terrorists to terrorize. Is it the duty of a cheetah to hunt? Of course! What about us, sitting and talking, not out crusading to others’ justice! Are we to blame for having this conversation? Aurelius’ point is that the natural order is indifferent, and acts in ways you may not understand. Some say terror will unite the world to root it out, others say it will divide it. Don’t reduce Baldwin’s argument to simply be a rejection of authority and a Marx-esque call for the leveling of classes. You speak rather confidently my friend, I feel you trying to sway me to a political agenda.

A: Belittling!? As Baldwin so beautifully puts it, this issue can only be solved through the awakening of white people to their senses, so yes, I would say it *is* our duty to reflect and do less evil. That is *my* Aureliusian duty, at least. And don’t be skeptical of effecting real political change with speech and actions. Witness the transformations in our human rights achieved since the Romans!

D: Advancements in human rights! Please, we have all but the same situation today as eons ago, but our weapons are infinitesimally more powerful. We hold the capacity to destroy our planet, can you fathom that?

A: And would you sit idly by and let someone use such weapons? I doubt you would remain unfazed and embrace the emperor’s other little adage “Realizing that I am part of just such a universe, I will calmly accept whatever happens” any more than Baldwin, who must find absolutely no resonance in that saying.¹¹

D: You’re right, that one’s somewhat glib. I find Aurelius’ most valuable insights to come from the focusing on oneself, not on the action or inaction toward the other. His advice is to pay attention to your perception of evil, and not pursue revenge: “Someone wrongs me. Why should I care? That’s his business—his inclinations and actions are up to him. I care only about what the universal nature wills for me, and I do what my own nature wills.”¹² But also that “doing evil doesn’t harm the universe, nor does one person’s wrongdoing hurt another. It only hurts the person who is doing the wrong.”¹³ Doesn’t Baldwin say a similar thing, that “the best revenge is not to do as they do”?¹⁴

The glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another—or others—always has been and always will be a recipe for murder. There is no way around this... I am very much concerned that American Negroes achieve their freedom here in the United States. But I am also concerned for their dignity, for the health of their souls, and must oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has been done to them... *Whoever debases others is debasing himself*.¹⁵

A: And what if “the universal nature wills” for some to rebel against those doing wrong to them? I fail to see the relevance in the self-reflection of others’ evil, which is Bly’s point about the projection of shadow as well. Do you think this could be applied to those acts of terrorism, for example? Did I, or my character, in some way fault and allow such atrocities to happen? Yes, surely my government and my nation ought to be held accountable as well, but people aren’t their governments. There are powers at play in this country over which I have no control. Are you responsible for who you are before you’ve even acted, or come to terms with your own identity? Is Baldwin’s case, born literally into trouble and equated as a criminal not an outright refusal of this claim?¹⁶

The emperor talks about how to change one’s *own* worldview, which is quite easy for him to do. Baldwin is struggling with how to change someone *else’s* worldview, and have them wake up to all the misery they are creating for *themselves, and* others. Of course his book serves testament to this goal. And yet Baldwin tells his nephew that *he* must act in the face of whites not accepting blacks, but blacks having to accept whites, not with revenge and defiance, but with love.¹⁷

D: Ah, he speaks beautifully on love doesn’t he...

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace...in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.¹⁸

I am reminded of Bly’s crow in this passage, the courageous bird that dares dispel any binary but that doesn’t presume its courage. Bly’s argument has the nuance of a desire for conflict, doesn’t it?

You’re right that people aren’t their governments, but they are certainly amidst the conflict of their governments. Hitchens said that despite the entrenchment of peoples’ views, it’s this strife that drives progress:

As a species, we may by all means think ruefully about the waste and horror produced by war and other forms of rivalry and jealousy. However, this can’t alter the fact that in life we make progress by conflict and in mental life by argument and disputation.¹⁹

Like we saw before with duties, strife constantly surrounds and consumes us. But Hitchens’ call for contrariety brings into relief a contention between duty and defection: “Injustice and

irrationality are inevitable parts of the human condition, but challenges to them are inevitable also.”²⁰ Baldwin’s dissent was as much dissent as it was solidarity with other blacks. Everyone, by sheer means of living in human communities, is situated in a position of this nonconsensual “us vs. them” language Hitchens warns about.²¹

A: What would you constitute as dissent then? While, he claims, “people have a need for reassurance and belonging,” Hitchens says the following of dissenters: “notice that...the resort is not to lone defiance but to another form of loyalty and adherence; in one case family values and in the other the claim of the coterie.”²² I’m curious if you would consider a terrorist as objecting to civil society, more loyal to another ‘duty,’ and thus a dissenter. Or if the inculcation of terrorists is yet another example of following a somehow tempting pattern of ideology and behavior. Of course the labeling of ‘dissenter’ isn’t as important as what we ought consider constructive engagement versus hive-minded, mass behavior.

Perhaps, as you mentioned, it has to do with attunement to being grouped against one’s will, or being spoken for. Baldwin similarly calls for the deconstruction of the ‘us vs. them’ structure. He, like Bly and—okay, I’ll grant it to you—Aurelius recognize the codependence and graduatedness of dualities: “In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation -- if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women.”²³ In many ways, however, the ‘us vs. them’ structure was not “smuggled in” against the consent of those using it from the time of slavery through the civil rights era and up until today—it was very much felt. Jihadism, for instance, reinforces the ‘us vs. them’ structure, and is almost certainly ‘felt’ as well.

D: The question of what we ought to consider dissent is not a compelling one for me, as we’ve seen that no matter the definition, there will always be discord. But with framing comes standards which we cannot weigh without favoring some arguments over others. If our standards are the advancement of individual freedoms, for instance, we may presume that a dissenter is ‘qualified’ to object to *hijab*-wearing but then find that Muslim women might not share this standard, as problematized in Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety*. Such is the danger of reaching for morality across cultural boundaries. Yes, dissent about the method of engagement itself must be included but like our Constitution, this must also operate under the given standards. Your questions about terrorism can be answered by discarding ideology, however. Just as Hitchens argues that the religious belief of Dr. Martin Luther King was not sufficient or necessary for his actions²⁴, evil can also not be explained by religion, but of faulting human character.

A: Hitchens insists on arguing on the side of *reason* however, distrusting ideology as an index of morals. He writes that religious people “want god on their side and believe they are doing his work—what is this, even at its very best, but an extreme form of solipsism?”²⁵ We are left in rather murky territory since knowledge of the foreign culture is necessary to examine the power at play in *hijab*-wearing, as you said. But as Hitchens said of his trip to Sarajevo: “I had no excuse *not* to go. If I could be of no help, that would be come evident. If I was making myself absurd or getting in the way, I could count on certain people to tell me.”²⁶

D: I'm not sure what you mean—that dissent is valuable in its own right, for its potential effects?

A: Precisely. As you said, religion and ideology may fuel hatred within terrorists and drive them to kill innocents and even themselves, but it is not the root cause of evil. Ideology is murky. The post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* clarifies this by entirely removing that intermediate layer of ideology. The man and his son in the book encounter thieves and cannibals without the smallest regard for any guiding principles, their behavior resembling wild and savage animals. They come across an old man and speak about religion and survival:

There is no God.

No?

There is no God and we are his prophets.

I dont understand how you're still alive. How do you eat?

I dont know.²⁷

We see Hitchens' point by going to the extreme. Even without civilization—laws, police, or religion—the man insists on the categories “good” and “evil” to his son, assuring him that “we’re carrying the fire”²⁸ or that the “good guys dont give up.”²⁹ It’s no longer a matter of principle, because they live in a world of abject peril. The division of the world into these categories can be plainly seen to be survival strategies, just as the acts of savagery are. What then, would our emperor say of the ‘natural order of things’ when there’s no true justice, only our laws and feelings which approximate some vested goal for a specific group of people?

D: Ha! Let’s not start that again. But you know, during our conversation earlier I was thinking that Aurelius’ indifferent nature resemble Darwin’s quite a lot. But now I am realizing that power is crucially important in that picture as well. What is the natural world if not solely constituted of power negotiations? And, for that matter, if you insist on separating the two, the human world as well? The human race is not an ant colony—we’re not all clones programmed to care as much for others as we do for ourselves. The domination of some over others is absolutely inevitable, and that reaches far beyond human morality. It even reaches into concepts, like the spread and dominance of particularly adaptable and competitive ideologies such as capitalism. Even the very marketplace of idea competition, the idea itself, falls subject to this fractal principle. Content snugly fits form.

A: You’re speaking of memes of course. Listen to these words from Kathleen Stewart’s book in the part entitled “Teenagers Who Kill:”

These stories don’t end in a moral but left to resonate with all the other ways that intensities rise out of the ordinary and then linger, unresolved, until memory dims or some new eruption catches our attention.³⁰

I like Stewart because she makes me question whether morality is even at play here. I see this pattern in the media all the time. Events get written over by new ones, and we are simply left

with a chaotic sentimentality. Videos of police brutality, for instance, become witnessed like snuff films, with cultic fascination, don't they? The labeling of these events as 'evil' aren't honest labelings of morality, but merely incite a response we can only attribute to our morals and shadows. Not out of a sense of justice, natural order, or reason, but as she later describes it:

We will follow any hint of energy, at least for a little while.

When something happens, we swarm toward it, absorb its force, pour over its details, make fun of it, hide it, spit it out, or develop a compulsion to participate. We deny its pull. We blame it on the suburbs and the TV and ourselves. But we desire it too, and the cure is usually another kind of swarming, this time under the sign of redemption: a mobilization of justice, a neighborhood watch committee, some way of keeping our collective eyes open. Something to do.³¹

D: As "something to do!" I think it's true, but that leaves us pretty wide open, doesn't it? Humans have the choice of creating good as they see it, and also the choice of evil; it's all a rather funny phenomenon. And all the while the world sits indifferent to it all, knowing that neither the cooperation nor the self-destruction of humankind won't ever really matter to no one but humankind itself.

A: The world has no capacity to know, care, or matter, without humankind. The indifference of the world doesn't make us indifferent by association, friend! Quite the contrary, the indifference of the world creates the vacuum into which our meaning seeps!

Citations

- ¹ Stewart, p. 68
- ² Bly, p. 24
- ³ Bly, p. 48
- ⁴ Hicks & Hicks, p. 32
- ⁵ Baldwin, p. 88
- ⁶ Hicks & Hicks, p. 103
- ⁷ Baldwin, p. 92
- ⁸ Baldwin, p. 86
- ⁹ Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 118, citing Werner Eck, *Die Organization Italiens* (1979), 146ff.
- ¹⁰ Baldwin p. 31
- ¹¹ Hicks & Hicks p. 114
- ¹² Hicks & Hicks, p. 60
- ¹³ Hicks & Hicks, p. 101
- ¹⁴ Hicks & Hicks, p. 65
- ¹⁵ Baldwin, p. 82-83
- ¹⁶ Baldwin, p. 28
- ¹⁷ Baldwin, p. 8
- ¹⁸ Baldwin, p. 95
- ¹⁹ Hitchens, p. 20
- ²⁰ Hitchens, p. 27
- ²¹ Hitchens, p. 103
- ²² Hitchens, p. 96
- ²³ Baldwin, p. 97
- ²⁴ Hitchens, p. 61
- ²⁵ Hitchens, p. 56
- ²⁶ Hitchens, p. 131-132
- ²⁷ McCarthy, p. 170
- ²⁸ McCarthy, p. 83
- ²⁹ McCarthy, p. 137
- ³⁰ Stewart, p. 74
- ³¹ Stewart, p. 70