On Others as Evil: Toward a Truly Comparative Politics

Charles E. Butterworth

The first part of this essay's title is inspired by the antepenultimate speech of Garcin in Sartre's famous play *Huis Clos* or *No Exit*:

> So that's what Hell is. I never would have believed it . . . You remember: sulphur, pyre, the grill . . . Ah! what a joke. There's no need for a grill; Hell is Others.[1]

Given the tendency these days for differing parties to turn every encounter with their interlocutor—their other—away from what could be a fruitful discussion and reduce it to a series of mutual recriminations, Garcin's insight seems especially apt. Yet when the discussion concerns the West as contrasted to the Middle East, even Christianity or Judaism as contrasted to Islam, there is far too much for each interlocutor to learn from the other to dwell so on bygone slights, especially since those slights arise from the very ignorance that exploration of our different ways—exchange in the best sense of the term—should overcome. For exchange to be fruitful, each party needs to look at the best in his or her own tradition, rather than at the worst, or even the ordinary, and to ask that the interlocutor do the same for his or her tradition.

Like Homer, we can begin by praying for inspiration of sorts:

> Tell me Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven far journeys, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel.

But like the wily, ever devious, as well as unremitting curious and far-sighted Odysseus of whom Homer sings, we need then to reflect on the things we see and experience. Odysseus is a man well-traveled, a man of

Charles E. Butterworth is a professor of government at the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland.

broad experience—albeit not entirely by his own choosing. Were it not that he never abandons the desire to regain his homeland and hearth, to arrive at the happiness he understands to be truly his, he might even be called multicultural. After all, Homer also says the following of him:

> Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of, many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea, struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions.[2]

Nowadays, thinkers inspired by Sartre's dismal view of the world and humanity's place in it hold more sway than those wont to interpret such things with Homeric optimism. Garcin's whining fearfulness has replaced Odysseus's quiet courage. How this has come about, how reasoned confidence in the soundness and goodness of the whole has given way to claims against the power of reason and apprehension that the universe is in no way coherent, is a tale worth hearing. After all, critics of the West focus on precisely this kind of confusion when seeking to prove its moral bankruptcy. That a westerner would dare tell such a tale, then, albeit ever so briefly, is not an act of treason, nor even a sign of willingness to castigate western culture. For, in the very telling, the strength of human understanding—an understanding that defies the partial characterization of western, Middle Eastern, or any other label more restrictive than human—becomes apparent.

The World of Odysseus

Manly virtue—that is, the strength of will and the ability to stand up for one's own—was prized above all else in those days long ago. Little attention is paid by Homer to how cities were ruled; in fact, they seem to have been little more than appendages to large houses.[3] Attached as some men were to acquisition and its subsequent preservation, others were only too eager to take what belonged to friend or foe. And women were equally ready to seek their own good in this scheme of things. Paris could in no way have so wrongly repaid the hospitality of Menelaos had Helen not been willing to run away with him. Nor would the lusty young suitors who settled down in Odysseus's house awaiting Penelope's decision have lingered so had some of the serving women not been willing to pass the night with them.[4]

Yet none of Homer's male characters shows any awareness that women may have the same desires for justice and freedom as men. Even in Hades Agamemnon rages about his wife Clytemnestra's infidelity and treachery, but never once blames himself for his own infidelity with Kassandra. Nor does he ever show the least regret over having seized the maid Chryseis, scorned the pleas of her father—Apollo's priest—for her return thereby bringing great suffering upon his troops, or forced Achilles to deliver his own maid Briseis.[5] Penelope, Odysseus's faithful and long-suffering wife, is praised for the stratagems she employs to withstand the importunities of the suitors, and she shows herself to be as suspicious and wily in dealing

with the bloodied, victorious Odysseus as he himself would have shown in a similar situation. To be sure, much as she wants to believe his claims, her distrust is inspired by awareness of how harshly she would be judged were she mistaken as to whether that lusty warrior was her long-lost husband.[6] Moreover, Penelope's guileful endurance of the suitors during the nine long years after the fall of Troy reveals another aspect of how conscious she is of the need to watch out for her own future.

The world Odysseus and his fellows inhabit is not by any means one of their own making. What they know of its origins and of the way it functions is what the poets, Hesiod as well as Homer, have told them. The gods who govern this world are not necessarily well-disposed toward human beings, however much mortals try to please and placate them. Either because one god takes a liking to some group of human beings and persuades the father of the gods, Zeus, to befriend this group, even at the expense of another, or because a group of human beings offends an ally of one of the gods who seeks to have them punished, or for reasons not always clear, humans suffer. Then again, humans bring misery upon themselves due to foolish actions and misplaced pride. After easily defeating the Kikonians on their way home from Troy, some of Odysseus's warriors linger to feast and drink by the sea-shore, then are killed when superior forces are rallied and fall upon them. Odysseus himself, having tricked and blinded the evil Cyclops, Polyphemos, cannot resist a jeering taunt—not once, but twice—as he and his remaining companions sail safely away, and so Polyphemos implores Poseidon to avenge him. This plea, honored, causes Odysseus his many long years of wandering.[7]

Given such a world, manly courage is not all that is prized. To succeed, one must also be adept at persuasion—able to sway fellow human beings as well as gods. The quiet sagacity of a Nestor is always welcome, but the vehement rhetoric of a terrible chief—Agamemnon when challenged by Achilles—can also be of great use. In addition, one must be adept at concealment, sly, able to turn a bad situation to one's own advantage, skillful at deceiving fellow humans and even gods, insofar as they are not all-knowing. That is, one must fear and respect the gods, honor them at all times, but also be ever alert for ways to pursue one's own advantage without regard to their will. Half truth, complete falsehood, deception, and even recourse to nature—all these are appropriate ways to thwart the harmful intentions of the gods. Sometimes, one god will intercede with humans in order to undo the goals of another. At such times, knowledge of nature becomes a powerful antidote against the willful ways, even the sorcery, of the gods.[8]

The Socratic Challenge

Such an understanding of the world, however much it inspires longing for the former greatness of magnificent warriors, does not withstand rational scrutiny. If the gods are to be worshipped or merely praised as models

to be followed, they cannot be portrayed as deceiving each other, playing favorites with one human being rather than another, or plotting evil against humans for no good reason, not to mention taking advantage of humans for their own private pleasures. So, at any rate, argued Socrates. Then he offered a new speech about the gods—a nonpoetic theology—to show how one ought to think about them. And in keeping with this, he formulated a teaching about human excellence.

Regular order, the kind that does not bend to human pleas or imprecations yet seems generally beneficial for, even favorable to, human beings and that can be fathomed by human reason—an order that governs the whole according to fixed laws—was discerned, discovered, or otherwise made evident to, and by, Socrates. Given such order, manly courage to resist vicissitude—human or natural—was still important, but it required a new approach to knowledge. Knowledge could no longer be merely a tool useful for deceiving the gods or fellow human beings, but now became the key to understanding the universe in all its complexity. The new understanding showed that humans need no longer fear divine treachery, no longer think that death was the worst fate that could befall them. Confident that things truly were ordered so as to provide for them and relieved of the fear that the gods deemed them mere playthings, human beings could take greater risks; they could explore more deeply the meaning of courage. And since human beings seemed always to be torn from the simple pursuit of their rational and demonstrable good by their desires, it also became necessary to investigate moderation as a quality worth pursuing. (Odysseus and his companions knew, of course, that immoderation was a vice to be avoided; but they somehow seemed to note this only after the fact or when it was already too late to limit the deleterious effects of too much drink or food. Socrates raised moderation to a new status in human conduct, both by his speech and by his own abstemious ways.)

Linked with wisdom, courage, and moderation was justice, the latter coming forth as a combination of all three in dealings with others. To the pursuit of this elusive quality Socrates devoted himself. However it is ultimately to be defined—what is in the interest of the stronger, so long as the stronger is understood as being the wiser; or a civic arrangement whereby each member of the city performs his or her own work, that work being determined in accordance with each one's nature—justice becomes as important and as elusive a human excellence as wisdom. (Alfarabi, a successor who clearly grasped how to compare distinct cultures, explained the highest form of justice as stemming from love; that, he insisted, could be developed only to the extent that citizens shared the most important things, opinions about the order of the universe and their place in it.)

To return, it is thanks to Socrates and his followers that this new view of the cosmos and the role of human beings within it prevailed. Advancement and security were seen as coming to those who pursued virtue, either for themselves or so that others might benefit from its application, and to those educated to prefer it. Human beings were no longer

depicted as coming together merely to acquire private goods and preserve them for future enjoyment. Now civic associations were judged in terms of how closely they provided for the well-being of their citizens, such well-being admitting nonetheless of degrees according to the qualifications of each individual in the various human excellences. Hence freedom also came to be prized, not as an end in itself, but as a necessary condition for any fully human action.

The City of God

Accused of introducing new gods into Athens and of corrupting the youth, Socrates was found guilty by his fellow citizens and sentenced to death. His fate anticipates a conflict subsequent philosophers were to have with the dominant opinions of the city, especially those opinions concerning an all-powerful and all-knowing divinity who indicates His will to humanity by means of messengers and prophets. It also indicates an important political change: Cities and associations of cities, kingdoms, even empires had now come upon the political scene. Extending its reach into lands where a vision of a single deity prevailed, the pagan Roman empire eventually found itself bested not by swords but by beliefs. To simplify greatly, it was replaced by a Christian empire whose ruler claimed divine sanction and yet another kind of rule and of thinking was ushered in.

The tentativeness and self-doubt so characteristic of Socrates and even sometimes evident in Odysseus were rarely found among the rulers of this new regime. Their confidence about the need to bring all human beings to their own beliefs resulted in many injustices and eventually rekindled the older conflict between philosophers and the city. As it played itself out in the new Christian setting, calls for separating ecclesiastical and political power became more widespread. The ultimate victory of those calling for such separation—insisting, as it were, that the city of God be relegated to another realm—was aided in no small part by the famous example of Jesus Christ urging a fundamental distinction between the powers of God and those of worldly or secular rulers. (One must not, however, neglect that he called for such a distinction or separation more in order to protect the rights of religion than to limit its sphere.)

The City of Man

At any rate, the pursuit of the heavenly city on earth gave way to the effort to attain the political well-being of humans in a sure and effective manner. Several names can be associated with this enterprise—Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, Spinoza, Descartes, Locke, and Rousseau, to name but a few—all of whom consciously worked to lower the standards by which human and political virtue would be judged. It is not that they

were wicked or even inspired by a desire to cause harm. On the contrary, deep patriotism moved some; anguish over the troubles arising from confused interpretations of what gave title to rule stirred others. Common to all, however, is the belief in the necessity of reducing political considerations to a simple formula such as to be grasped and easily applied by all.

The enterprise has culminated in the replacement of virtue by conscience or sentiment and human happiness first by survival and then by contentment. Freedom has come to be an end, rather than a condition for a noble striving. And now, given unprecedented claims about the immutable laws that govern human thought and action, the very possibility of freedom has become a subject of controversy. Many in the West, like so many Garcins, think they have liberated themselves from the restrictions of traditional belief only to suffer total despair and deep anguish over their inability to govern themselves or to live with others in peace and harmony. But the story does not end here.

Preserving Freedom for Virtue as Morality

There is no need to close on a note of despair. Nothing indicates that the West is in a hopeless quandary or that every faithful adherent to a divine law must henceforth shun western learning as too decadent and confused to warrant further consideration. In darker days than these, an unlikely moralist raised his voice to rail against abandoning the struggle. Indeed, almost like a new Odysseus, and surely as wily, Albert Camus was ever ready to urge that the battle be continued on the highest ground. He placed great faith in humanity and reminded his interlocutors of the need to be constantly wary of those who would advance themselves or their national aspirations by neglecting the duties of their basic humanity.

Camus expressed his anguish over the difficulties we face as humans through stories, stage plays, and essays. But as much as he gave voice to feelings of despair, he also pointed to the considerations that would help one resist the final, fatal act of submission. The tension he so clearly felt cannot be overly emphasized: Camus saw clearly what modern philosophy had wrought and steadfastly refused to succumb to it but was not able to offer a clear and compelling alternative.

> What, then, is this inestimable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary for its life? A world that can be explained, even with bad reasons, is a familiar world. But in a universe suddenly stripped of illusions and of insights, man feels himself alienated. This exile is without recourse, for it has no memories of a lost fatherland nor hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, between the actor and the set, is precisely the feeling of absurdity. Insofar as all sane men have contemplated suicide, it is easy to recognize without further explanation that

> there is a direct link between this feeling and aspiring towards nothingness.[9]

Deeply felt confusion about direction, underscored by serious doubts concerning the power of human reason, once prompted Camus to bewail plaintively: "I do not know, or I know poorly, where I am going."[10]

Yet he was not, for all that, completely without resources. His criticism of the way things are, as expressed in the Sisyphus essay, is of a piece with the tears and lamentations of Odysseus when stranded on Calypso's island.[11] Unlike Odysseus, however, Camus never managed to liberate himself from his doubts. Either not favored by the gods or insufficiently inspired by his own reflections on the human condition, he never found the planking for a ship that would carry him away from such barren shores and return him to his "lost fatherland" or to "a promised land." Still, much as he gave voice to the power that the feeling of abandon generates when we no longer make sense of the world around us—whether it be due to loss of illusion or simple failure to understand—Camus never acceded to the alienation and absurdity he so poignantly evoked. Indeed, the core of his Sisyphus complaint about the world we inhabit—that it is now "*privé . . . de lumières*," that is, "stripped . . . of insights"—points simply to his recognition that the old explanations were no longer adequate. It does not go beyond such pointing.

Such awareness does not mean one must embrace any and every political solution that comes along, much less give oneself over to foolish whims. There are still valid criteria for judging human actions. Thus, Camus could explain to a young German friend why blind patriotism was no solution.

> You said to me: "The greatness of my country has no price. Everything it entails is good. In a world in which nothing any longer has sense, those who, like we young Germans, have the luck to find sense in the destiny of their nation must sacrifice everything to it." I liked you then, but that is where, already, I broke with you. "No, I said to you, I cannot believe it is necessary to subject everything to the goal one pursues. There are means that cannot be excused. And I want to be able to love my country while still loving justice. I do not want just any greatness for it, were that greatness blood and falsehood. I want to make it live in making justice live." You said to me: "Then you do not love your country."[12]

Justice, defined here in terms of avoiding wanton bloodshed and falsehood, but surely reaching to far more complicated considerations, stands as much against blind patriotism as it does against the anguish engendered by doubt and fear. It also stands against any attempt to bring about a greater human blood by harming human beings here and now. Love of a cause, any cause, can never be separated from love of justice. Indeed, the reflections of Albert Camus as much as those of Alfarabi show ineluctably that as long as we

guide ourselves by recognition of our common humanity, such a rupture can never occur. Such a sense of the human condition prompts the very morality that preserves freedom, and that freedom validates morality.

Conclusion

Socrates's insistence on the need for us to abandon Odysseus's confused and confusing images of the gods—beings who dally with us as playthings—complicates our lives, even while it enriches them. Faced with human injustice, sometimes so far-reaching as to appear divinely inspired or at least divinely tolerated (but for what reason?), we lose our way. By no means a novel phenomenon in the West, not at least when one takes a long look at the history of western thought, such loss of direction is not so cataclysmic as to warrant totally unprecedented solutions. Those interested in understanding the West, in striving for a truly comparative politics, will do well to heed the way doubts have been expressed over time as well as to reflect upon the various ways they have been resolved. There are, to be sure, many problems that plague contemporary western society. None, however, is so grandiose or so far-reaching that the serious enterprise of proving divine intentions should be interrupted. Only when we fail to discern the depth and the intensity of thought expressed by our fellow citizens can we side with Garcin and declare that "Hell is others." A far better course would lead us to side with the one who breathed those words into Garcin when he delivered his final judgment on Camus, a fellow thinker who had dared to probe to the core of human existence:

> In this century, and against History, he stands out as the current heir of this long line of moralists whose works perhaps constitute what is most original in French letters.[13]

In other words, a correct understanding of the West begins with an appreciation of its moralists, from Odysseus to Camus, maybe even to Sartre. It will pay attention to the way the West has learned from, even incorporated, the thought of other cultures. And it will note, not without a sense of wonder, how much those who appear most lost and most despairing are able to contribute to moral rejuvenation. In that wonder lies the impetus to appreciate others for all that they truly are.

Endnotes

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis Clos*, in Théatre (Paris: Gallimard, 1947); see Scene V, p. 167: "Alors, c'est ça l'enfer. Je n'aurais jamais cru . . . Vous vous rappeles: le soufre, le bûcher, le gril . . . Ah! quelle plaisanterie. Pas besoin de gril, l'enfer, c'est les Autres."

2. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trns. Richard Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 1:1-5.

3. Ibid., 17:201-5 and 254-55; 23:129-51.

4. Ibid., 18:320-25; 19:491-98; 20:6-8; and 22:461-64.

5. Ibid., 11:405-34 (note also 441-43 and 454-56) and 24:219-22; *Iliad,* trans. Richard Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:1-456.

6. Homer, *Odyssey,* 23:1-152 and 153-230.

7. Ibid., 9:39-61 and 105-566, esp. 526-35.

8. Ibid., 10:133-574, esp. 275-306 and 301-4. Yet nature is not always a friend to humans; see 21:416-18.

9. See Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe, Essai sur l'absurde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), 18: "Quel est donc cet incalculable sentiment qui prive l'esprit du sommeil necessaire a sa vie? Un monde qu'on peut expliquer même avec de mauvaises raisons est un monde familier. Mais au contraire, dans un univers soudain privè d'illusions et de lumières, l'homme se sent un étranger. Cet exil est sans recours puisqu'il est privé des souvenirs d'une patrie perdue ou de l'espoir d'une terre promise. Ce divorce entre l'homme et sa vie, l'acteur et son décor, c'est proprement le sentiment de l'abusrdité. Tous les homes sains ayant songé à leur propre suicide, on pourra reconnaître, sans plus d'explications, qu'il y a un lien direct entre ce sentiment et l'aspiration vers le néant."

10. See Albert Camus, "L'Enigme" in *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 863: "*Je ne sais pas, ou je sais mal, où je vais.*" Cited by Tony Judt in "The Lost World of Albert Camus, *The New York Review of Books* 41/46 (6 October 1994): 2. See also "L'Algérie déchirée" and "Lettre à un militant Algérien" in *Actuelles III (Chroniques algériennes 1939-1958)* (Paris: Callimard, 1958), 128, 143.

11. Homer, *Odyssey,* 5:13-17, 81-84, 148-58, and ff.

12. Albert Camus, *Lettres à un ami allemand* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948); see "Première lettre," pp. 19-20: "Vous me disiez: 'La granduer de mon pays n'a pas de prix. Tout est bon qui la consomme. Et dans un monde où plus rien n'a de sens, ceux qui, comme nous, jeunes Allemands, ont la change d'en trouver un au destin de leur nation doivent tout lui sacrifier.' Je vous aimais alors, mais c'est là que, déjà, je me séparais de vous. 'Non, vois disais-je, je ne puis croire qu'il faille tout asservie au but quel [on poursuit. Il est des moyens qui ne s'excusent pas. Et je voudrais pouvoir aimer mon pays tout en aimant la justice. Je ne veux pas pour lui de n'importe quelle grandeur, fût-ce celle du sang et du mensonge. C'est en faisant vivre la justice que je veux le faire vivre.' "Vous m'avez dit: 'Allons, vous n'aimes pas vortre pays.'" This is to be contrasted with Ibrahim Souss, *Letter to a Jewish Friend* (London: Quartet Books, 1989); originally published as *Lettre à un ami juif* (Paris: Seuil, 1988).

13. Jean-Paul Strtre, "Albert Camus" in *Situations* IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 126-29: "Il [Camus] représentait en ce siècle, et contre l'Histoire, l'héritier actuel de cette longue lignée de moralistes dont les oeuvres constitutent peut-être ce qu'il y a de plus original dans les lettres françaises." Cited in Tony Judy, "The Lost World," 5.