

The Meaning of Life and the Measure of Civilizations

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In what respects is Western civilization superior or inferior to its rivals? In raising this question we are addressing a particularly strong form of the problem of relativism. For in order to compare civilizations one with another we would need to be in possession of a framework that is neutral and objective, a framework based on principles of evaluation which would be acceptable, in principle, to all human beings. Morality will surely provide one axis of such a framework (and we note in passing that believers in Islam might quite reasonably claim that their fellow-believers are characteristically more moral than are many in the West). Criteria such as material well-being, too, will need to play a role, as also will happiness or pleasure (and again we note that it is not clear *a priori* that there is more happiness in the West than there is among the citizens of other civilizations). Since, however, these axes of evaluation do not run in tandem, we cannot expect to be able to formulate some single criterion which would enable us to rank civilizations in a simple unilinear order. Even happiness (*pace* some proponents of the utilitarian philosophy) comes in different types, and to count in the civilization stakes the happiness involved would presumably need to be of the right kind. Thus it is not clear that happiness derived from, say, taking drugs or torturing small animals is going to be able to count in favor of a civilization as much as, say, happiness derived from reading poetry or planting corn. Hence, for these and other reasons, we will have to deal with a multidimensional framework, in which some civilizations may excel along some axes but do badly on others.

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A further problem turns on the fact that there is no such relation as *better than*. Rather, when A is better than B then this is always *in some respect C*. Yet even when we compare one thing with another in some given respect we are not always dealing with a simple linear order. This is because the relation ‘being better than in respect C’ is not in every case transitive. Eating one piece of chicken is better than eating no chicken at all (supposing that you are hungry), but eating two pieces of chicken is better still. At some point, however, this chain must be set into reverse. Something similar might apply, now, in comparisons between civilizations. If one civilization is better than another because, for example, its citizens have more freedom, then it does not follow that a third civilization, which has more freedom still, is better than both.

Another problem turns on the evident looseness of the terms ‘civilization’ and ‘culture’. What is this thing called ‘Western civilization’ and what is this other thing called ‘Islamic civilization’? Are we referring here to what might be non-contiguous and mutually interpenetrating geographical regions? To populations of human beings existing at a given time? To traditions and habits of mind and action spread out in both time and space? Yet further problems arise when we attempt, for example, to sum the amount of happiness across an entire civilization. These and other problems will simply be noted here, as matters which would need careful treatment in any definitive presentation of the views defended; the details of their solution will not, I think, affect the conclusions to be drawn in the sequel.

The Problem of Relativism

We are presuming in what follows that it makes sense to apply the notions of good and bad, better and worse, to civilizations or cultures taken as a whole. Does this not presuppose what some, disparagingly, like to call the “God’s eye perspective”? The standard-bearers of relativism

would insist that the assumption that we could attain such a perspective – a perspective of the neutral, objective, detached observer – is sheer presumption. The enemies of relativism, in contrast, can point out that there are many areas in which we can indeed achieve a God’s eye perspective with relative ease: we can know, for instance, many simple facts of science – that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen, that heavy bodies fall when dropped, that there is salt within the sea. The problem arises when it comes to extending our knowledge beyond such matters of brute fact to include also matters of value, and indeed of value pertaining to the relative merits of entire civilizations. Even in relation to such matters, however, we can point to many propositions which are non-controversial in the sense that they would be accepted by all human beings. That murder is wrong, for example, or that happiness is (all else being equal) better than unhappiness. This gives me sufficient confidence to suppose that constructing the sort of framework I have in mind – which will after all deal with the value-qualities instantiated by different civilizations at a very high level of generality – is not beyond the bounds of possibility.

Freedom and the Measure of Civilizations

My primary concern here will be not with the dimensions of morality and happiness as these might play a role in the measure of civilization, but rather with the much more controversial dimension of *freedom*. Many of us in the West like to believe that we enjoy more freedom than do the citizens of other civilizations, and we like to believe also that (again, other things being equal) this makes our civilization better, in this respect, than those other civilizations. But while the intrinsic value of freedom comes close to being a self-evident truth for us in the West, it seems not to be self-evident to all human beings. Saddam Hussein is well pleased when his people celebrate his birthday in glorious pomp merely because they have been commanded to do

so. He seems to set no store by the fact that something is done freely; and the same is true, it seems, for very many tyrants and despots, both large and small. Moreover, letting freedom take its course can of course lead also to bad consequences – something which makes it very easy for some to argue that freedom is not an unalloyed good and thus that it needs to be constrained. We cannot, therefore, say that the West is best at least in this respect: that it has more freedom, or more respect for freedom, than this or that other civilization, for views differ from civilization to civilization on the issue of whether freedom is an intrinsic value.

The Utility of Freedom

To see how we might make progress here let us consider the question why precisely it is that we, in the West, want people to do the right thing of their own free will? One reason might be the practical one advanced already by Mill as part of his defense of the freedom of speech. We cannot know in advance what the correct answer to any given hard problem might be. We therefore leave people the freedom to advance as many alternative answers as possible, even at the risk of all manner of redundancy. Their efforts are then in sum more likely to yield results closer to the truth than would those achieved under more constrained conditions. But then we can imagine a simple thought-experiment that will set this pragmatic factor out of account. Imagine that the authority and charisma of some Great Leader is so great that he is able to make his subjects find exactly the right answers to important questions at his mere command.

Why would we (in the West) be likely to find the solutions arrived at under such circumstances less valuable than solutions arrived at by individuals exercising their own free choice? One reason might have to do with the needs of evidence gathering and epistemic justification. If people come to these or those results freely, then this provides independent

support for the validity of the results achieved. It gives us extra reason to think that they are true. This cannot be the whole story, however, for our intuition to the effect that there is something intrinsically better about people doing the right thing of their own free will, rather than at the command of some Great Leader, holds quite generally – it applies to human actions of all sorts – and not just in the realm of evidence and knowledge.

The Papal Revolution and the Invention of Western Reason

How, then, might we exploit the factor of freedom as part of our efforts to establish a neutral framework for the evaluation of civilizations? To answer this question we need to engage in some speculative history of the sort attempted by Husserl in his *The Crisis of European Sciences* though with a quite different sort of conclusion. That is to say, we need to go back in time to the point when the Western world – which at this time means: the world of Western Christendom – is facing what we might call the Y1K Problem. The millennium has passed. Against all expectations Jesus has not returned to Earth. The Church responds to the resultant widespread anger and consternation by establishing, slowly but surely, a new view of its own role in relation to earthly powers, a view according to which the reason why Jesus has not returned is because the Earth is not yet good enough for him. It is, accordingly, a sacred task of mankind, a task to be undertaken in part through a corpus of new institutions established under the authority of the Pope, to help make the Earth a better place, that it might be deserving of Christ's return. It is the role of each individual to make the earth a better place through the exercise of right reason and free will. Most importantly, this task is to be realized not by prayer or by appeal to miracles, not by pilgrimages, fasting or the worship of relics, but by the deliberate exercise of reason. We shall

see that this new view of the role of the Church represented a fateful step in the history of that Western civilization which the Church did so much to shape and nurture.

One signal event in this re-organization of the Church – commonly called the “Gregorian Reform” but more properly referred to (following Berman 1970) as the “Papal Revolution” – was the decision by Gregory VII that Roman law should be studied once more. This resulted in the creation in Bologna of the first European university. It gave rise to reforms of the canon law through the great ecumenical councils. But it gave rise also to a new role in society for the civil law, so that it became increasingly common for people to use the rational instrument of legal proceedings to decide disputes which would hitherto have been resolved through violence.

In other ways, too, a more structured, ordered society was slowly being constructed as new values and institutions and forms of social and economic organization were introduced. Science, learning and exploration were advanced; towns and cities and markets were expanded. And with this new, ordered society there came about also a new (or newly strengthened) conception of human life here on Earth, a conception according to which the actions of human beings, their contributions to improving the lot of mankind, can be of importance for their salvation in heaven.

I draw my account of this Papal Revolution from Philippe Nemo’s essay “The Invention of Western Reason” (2001), which defends the thesis that, through the entrenchment in society of these new doctrines, human action acquires a new sort of meaning. What one does here on Earth has meaning, because it plays a role in one’s own personal salvation:

The path towards heaven is no longer seen to be a *vertical* path, which God alone, with his magic and incomprehensible grace, or men relying on this magic alone, can ascend. Rather, the path to heaven now becomes a ... series of steps, a visible way, by which man can, through rational representation, progress towards the absolute. (Nemo 2001, p. 230)

One profound obstacle to the entrenchment of such a conception in earlier times had been the doctrine of original sin. This asserted that each human being had fallen so far that his salvation is something which could be achieved only by the grace of God. How can the finite works of man ever overcome the burden of infinite sin? The answer to this problem was provided – as a philosophical and theological supplement to the great institutional transformation initiated by the Gregorian Reforms – by Anselm’s doctrine of atonement, according to which (in very rough summary – I am not a theologian) Christ, a man who was totally innocent but who nonetheless suffered a horrible death, thereby won an infinite merit by which mankind as a whole was saved from original sin. It still remains for each individual to atone for his own particular sins, but it is precisely this which is made possible through the performance of concrete human works.

Salvation thereby becomes at least in part a human enterprise, in which man is called upon to measure and exercise his reason:

no action can be considered good which does not somehow transform the world for the better. But by transforming the world, man implies that he knew it, and will co-operate peacefully and efficiently within it. This therefore implies the use of reason, both in science and in law or politics. The use of reason now became a religious duty, which conflicted with the old duties to pray and to worship God (even though it did not substitute entirely for them). While the use of reason was once little more than an earthly concern, and often a sinful one, it now became a moral duty *par excellence*. (Nemo *op. cit.*, p. 231 f.)

It was precisely the Papal Revolution, in Nemo’s eyes, which enabled the West to achieve such great civilizational progress, resulting, as he conceives it, in the very invention of the modern world and of our contemporary democratic, liberal, scientific order.

From Greek Science to the Spirit of Capitalism

All of this was achieved because it became – and remained – entrenched in the thinking of the West that man is called upon for the sake of his salvation to use his natural powers of reason to transform society. The Western idea of progress, now entirely secularized, thus has deep religious roots. Western man seeks progress (at least ideally) not in wild swings of apocalypse and turmoil but in a rational, responsible, step-by-step manner, through the use by each one of us of his natural talents in fulfilling the needs of himself and of the wider society.

For Nemo the Papal Revolution is part of a broader historical development of what he calls the five miracles: of Greek science, the Roman law, the “Biblical miracle” (the invention of a new morality, with love and mercy extending beyond mere justice), the Gregorian reforms, and finally the fifth miracle of the Dutch, English and American democratic and liberal revolutions, which created the modern world.

As Christianity was be degrees relieved of its magical and superstitious elements, new moral, political, social and economic values were slowly established in the new emerging Western liberal societies. As Nemo points out, the latter rested (in principle at least) on the understanding that individual freedom is not a source of disorder, but rather, the origin of the most sophisticated orders men can create, in democracy, in markets, in the critical methodologies of science. The fifth “miracle” of the West is the comprehension, for the first time in intellectual history, of the concept of “spontaneous“ or “self-organizing” social order, or, to use Polanyi’s words, of “the logic of liberty”. (Nemo, *op. cit.*, p. 237)

The late phases of this same thousand-year development are documented also by Max Weber in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. It is a development by which some other

civilizations were for a long time marked unsystematically at best, but which has extended itself geographically over time above all through the impact of Western models.

What is important for our purposes, now, is that the significance of the proposition to the effect that your life on Earth can have meaning extends not just to the West, where it has become entrenched in the very sinews of our souls, but to humanity in general. We in the West came to the realization that life here on Earth can have meaning for religious reasons of a quite specific sort. But the core of this thesis can be taken also independently of these religious reasons. And in this form, I suggest, it can provide, in addition to morality, material well-being, and happiness, one further factor by which to measure civilizations: the factor of *degree of conduciveness to the leading of meaningful lives*.

The Meaning of Life

To make sense of this criterion we need to address the question of the meaning of life from a perspective which abstracts from features specific to the history of Western Christendom. What makes your life worth living? Happiness, some will say. But suppose you can have all the happiness you like by taking special pills or drinking just the right amounts of vodka? Perhaps love is what makes for a meaningful life. But falling in love, wonderful though it may be, is just an event, a threshold between two phases of your existence, and it is how you and your loved one shape your new lives together that matters for meaningfulness, and this means that you each still need to decide *what to do next* with your lives. Knowledge, for similar reasons, does not make a life worth living. Imagine that you could take a pill and immediately become as knowledgeable as the world's leading expert in quantum mechanics. You would still need to decide what to do

with your new-found knowledge. And similarly if you suddenly became very rich: you would still need to work out what to do with your new-found riches.

A more promising answer is: you should do good. Is there any difference between a life's being moral and a life's being meaningful? Leading a valuable life can, it is clear, contribute to leading a meaningful life; but the two are nonetheless independent. Doing good is not in and of itself sufficient to make a life meaningful. We can imagine a Forrest Gump figure who does good, over and over again, but always by accident and without being aware of the fact.

Another, more Platonic, answer is that to lead a meaningful life you should commune with the permanent things, contemplate God, or nothingness, or the infinity of the moral law within or of the starry heavens above. But this, too, is surely insufficient. Expressed as crudely as possible: a meaningful life is a life upon which some sort of pattern has been imposed – a pattern which is not some merely private thing which relates merely to what goes on inside your head but rather a pattern which involves also, in serious ways, your having an effect upon the world. What makes a life worth living has something to do with what you do, here on Earth. Beethoven, Mohammed, Alekhine, Faraday led meaningful lives because in giving shape to their own lives they also shaped the world around them.

But now what crucial is that to contribute to meaningfulness this imposed shape or pattern must be the result of your efforts and of your free decision. It contributes nothing to the meaning of your life if what you have achieved, if the effect you have upon the world, is merely the reflection of actions you have performed at the command of others. Sisyphus is the archetype of meaninglessness not only because of the inconsequentiality of his task, but also because he is condemned to perform it against his will. What matters in life is that you yourself create goals and that you set about realizing them. What matters is that you make something of your life in

relation to the world around way. When you set a goal, it matters that it is you who sets the goal and it matters that it is you who is responsible for realizing it. If you want to lead a meaningful life, then this means that you yourself have to decide how to shape your life and how to shape the world in which you live. (This will serve as the basis of our proposal as to the way in which freedom might serve, alongside morality, happiness, and material well-being, in defining a scale with which to measure civilizations.)

Honest Toil

Genuine achievements of the sort which make for a meaningful life involve the sort of making and realizing of plans which rest on the use of reason, on knowledge of one's own capacities and of one's physical and social environment. They go hand in hand with a willingness to sacrifice one goal for the sake of another and to delay immediate gratification for the sake of the future realization of some more significant goal.

The shape you give your life must further be non-trivial – it should consist in more than just getting drunk every day. When you set about realizing your plans it is important that this realization represents what is, for a person like you and in circumstances like yours, a genuine achievement. This means that it must involve genuine and coherently directed effort – it must cumulate towards some goal – and it means also that your exercise of effort must go hand in hand with your awareness of the possibility of failure. This means in turn, however, that this effort must be directed in relation to some independent standards of success and failure. By 'independent' here we mean standards which could in principle be applied, by some disinterested observer, in public and in the light of day.

Activities closely associated in our minds with the possibility of leading a meaningful life – medicine, chess, athletics, opera-singing, natural science, exploration, invention, house-building, raising children – are characteristically just those activities for which there exist such independent measures of success. In all the mentioned cases there are ways of gauging success and failure which are calibrated against the amount of care, effort and skill that is applied. To engage in these activities – for example to play in a soccer team or to sing in a choir – is to discover what the relevant standards of achievement are. Getting drunk every day, in contrast, is an activity which is characteristic of a quite different sort of life – where there are no public measures of success, no objective standards of better and worse. Activities which have to be practiced in the dark, too, are associated in our minds with meaninglessness, so that we are rightly suspicious of those who hide their meaning behind obscurity

Notice that the above makes the property of meaningfulness something objective. You may lead a meaningful life without knowing it or without caring about it. But equally, you may *think* you lead a meaningful life when in fact you do not do so. That an individual meets the criteria of given performance is not a matter of mere agreement. One baseball player is not better than another because people some are ready to assert that this is so or because others would prefer that this is so. Rather, he is judged to be a better player because of the merits he displays on the field. Public measures of success may of course, for a variety of different reasons, be misapplied. Suppose that you are an ambitious young artist. You have a successful career; your paintings are exhibited regularly because they sell very well. But what you do not know is that all of them are being bought by your rich uncle who has taken pity on you because you are such a bad painter. You think you lead a meaningful life, but you are mistaken.

Whether you lead a meaningful life, in sum, depends not on your, or other people's, beliefs or feelings, but on what you do, on what you achieve, and thus on the degree to which through your efforts you succeed in imposing a pattern on your life which has some implications also for the world around you. (There can be no private meaning.) A meaningful life, we can now also say, is a life which rests on honest achievements – achievements which would be credited as such by public measures of success applied honestly and correctly on the basis of all the relevant information.

The Meaning of Life and the Liberal Order

Not only civilizations but also institutions, political programs, policies and types of social order can be measured by their degree of conduciveness to the leading of meaningful lives among those who fall under their sway.

Universities, for example, have served through time as instruments which can facilitate the leading of more meaningful lives on the part of their students. The liberal arts are called 'liberal' precisely because they serve the end of training free human beings – in contrast to the *artes illiberales*, which are pursued for economic purposes. The aim of liberal education is to prepare the student for the pursuit of higher things. Universities are – in principle at least – able to create the conditions in which students can learn to measure themselves against hard tasks and to acquire the tools and options for the making of more complex and ambitious and courageous plans. Universities can teach their students to live their lives as free beings conscious of the values of truth and honesty, effort and diligence. But they will succeed in this only to the degree that universities themselves impose stringent conditions of grading on merit and embrace a conception of their mission as one that is devoted to the pursuit of truth under conditions of free

and open inquiry. And it almost goes without saying that the calibration of our universities towards these ends has been eroded considerably in recent times.

What, now, if we examine civilizations as a whole from this perspective? What type of *society* would be most conducive to the leading of meaningful lives on the part of those who live within it? It would be a society in which individuals and groups are allowed the maximum freedom to conceive and realize their own plans. But at the same time it would be a society in which actions and consequences are as far as possible tied together in such a way that people are rewarded for doing the right things and punished for doing wrong. It will be, in other words, a liberal society in something like the sense described by Hayek in his *Constitution of Liberty*, a society based on the rule of law, private property and the free market order, which provides individuals with incentives to invest effort in realizing their own freely chosen plans but at the same time ensures that they themselves bear the risks and responsibilities of the activities they undertake.

Indeed the operations of the free market themselves represent one further domain of human activity that is marked by the existence of an independent measure of success – in the form of profits. Business enterprise is itself a way in which individuals and groups can lead meaningful lives. The market order, moreover, enables its participants to lead meaningful lives in no small part by providing the resources and possibilities which enable others to lead meaningful lives in their turn. The capitalist helps us to realize our goals by creating systems and tools and propagating some of the visions which allow ever more complex plans to be conceived and realized by ever more people and groups. We in the modern world thereby benefit, at least in principle, from a virtuous cycle: individuals and institutions compete with each other to find ever new ways of helping people to make their lives ever more meaningful, and they thereby promote

an end which is no part of their intention. In this way the liberal order helps to ensure that there is no limit to the ever increasing variety of ways in which we can make for ourselves meaningful lives.

At the heart of the market order is its signal system; the constantly changing prices charged for goods and services enable the spontaneous coordination of the constantly changing plans of very many people – who almost certainly themselves have no direct communication with each other and who apprehend the world always from their own, local perspectives, formulating and realizing plans in reasoned fashion always against a background of partial and uncertain knowledge. Sometimes, of course, this coordination fails; very often we are defeated in the attempt to realize our plans for reasons which lie outside our control and for reasons which may seem unfair. The temptation is thus very strong to suppose that there must be some social arrangement alternative to the spontaneous ‘anarchy’ of prices and profits – a form of social order which could do a better job of coordinating plans via the exercise of some central controlling reason or plan.

As Hayek, and Ludwig von Mises before him, showed however, every form of social organization seeking to bring about one or other sort of patterned outcome – whether this be equality for all or special privileges for some – inevitably distorts the signal systems of the market in ways which lead, by degrees, to impoverishment, corruption, and servitude. It is, to be sure, difficult to dissuade human beings from the temptation of supposing that there is some way of creating, by deliberate design, a better form of social order (for example, one in which more people would lead more meaningful lives). As Hayek points out:

It may indeed prove to be far the most difficult and not the least important task for human reason rationally to comprehend its own limitations. It is essential for the growth of

reason that as individuals we should bow to forces and obey principles which we cannot hope fully to understand, yet on which the advance and even the preservation of civilization depend. (Hayek 1944, p. 33)

The superiority of the liberal order as concerns the benefits which it brings in the form of material welfare has long been subject of debate. Many have disputed also the degree to which the liberal order brings moral benefits. What have we have sought to show in the foregoing is that, however these debates might be resolved, a case can be made for the liberal order on quite other grounds, namely that it is able to maximize the degree to which people lead meaningful lives and that the imposition upon society of planned conceptions resting upon the idea of some privileged knowledge on the part of governments or planners always inevitably distorts just those features of the liberal order by which it is most sharply distinguished from its rivals.

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