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# The Pursuit of Excellence and the Role of Philosophy\*

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David Robertson, the American conductor, addressing his audience while conducting the 2009 *Last Night of the Proms*, reflected on the makeup of his orchestra: “When looking at strife in the world, and for examples of overcoming it, just think of the orchestra. All the instruments you see originated in different parts of the world. They have different histories and modifications. They look different and produce different sounds. But here they are playing together in harmony.”

When we look into the history of human civilizations, we will discover one fundamental fact: those which laid the stress on power and violence have passed away. Those which laid their stress on the development of excellence have survived. If history has any lesson to teach us, it is the following: excellence is the end that we have to set before ourselves. It is only through a life in excellence that we can bring together the nations into a fellowship. My argument in this lecture would be to show that a life in excellence is an agency and a transformative force, a lived experience underpinning the dialogue and cross-fertilization of cultures. Hence, to make the world a better place to live in, we must do a better job of ourselves. That is what a life in excellence stands for, and it is

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that which constitutes the final goal of humanity, when we rise from our present existence to a better life.

The term “excellence” certainly denotes a harmonious vision of the world that sees all cultures and traditions acknowledging as a common horizon of global responsibility. Therefore, the idea of the excellence is one shared by all civilizations; but the notions of what is the best, vary over a wide range of cultures.

Excellence is certainly an attractive moral and political idea, though it remains hard to define. Excellence has been defined in so many different ways that no consensus has emerged. Ancient Greeks were familiar with the word *arete* which was applied to the gods as well as to men. It would be wrong to translate *arete* as virtue, because virtue refers to a feature of a person’s psychology. But the word *arete* can be described as excellence, or as Plato defines it in the Republic as “the condition of one’s soul” (444d13). To the modern ear this may perhaps sound very strange, but central to the general outlook of the Greeks was a concern for excellence. For the Greeks, human excellence in general characterized the *kalos kagathos*, the noble and good man. But this nobility of spirit was considered possible only in the context of the polis, the city-state, because it is an ethos that excels toward public virtue. That is why *paideia* was the education through which excellence was fostered. To the Greeks the supreme task of man therefore was to discover what human “excellence” is and to achieve it; and *paideia* traced the steps of the discovery and the growing process and enrichment of the human ideal. The Greeks believed that excellence breeds excellence. So striving for excellence for its own sake, for truth, beauty and goodness in the whole educational process, was considered as the only way to produce it. For example, in Homer “being best” (*aristos*) meant a striving for excellence, a supra-personal ideal pursued without compromise, even at the cost of life itself. In the *Ajax* of Sophocles we can see the same Homeric note: “Live best or die best, for the best man/it must be one or the other” (479-80). The stress is on the manner, not merely the matter, of living and dying. Therefore to be *aristos* (the “best”) one needs to have “excellence.” One can say that excellence for the Greeks is more than merely an ethical term. It was above all a quality of character, to be realized in action. This is what Aristotle says in Book II, chapter 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he summarizes his account of excellence as “a

determining choice, involving the observance of the mean relative to us..." (1106b36-1107a2). According to Aristotle, excellence, then, is that condition which best suits humans to perform those activities which are distinctively human. Hence the best life for a human being involves not solitary or disinterested contemplation of the world, but consideration of "the human things, such as the just, the beautiful, and the good". Therefore, for Aristotle, the philosophic life, unconcerned with the human good, cannot recognize itself as a pursuit of excellence for human beings.

In the same manner, Cicero believed that there was no other training than philosophy that was more likely to lead to excellence or more likely to deter from the arrogance that threatened justice. He used the word *humanitas* to describe the refining or humanizing effects of a broad education in the liberal arts. But *humanitas* meant more to Cicero than high culture or refined manners. It also implied a loftiness of mind reflected in worthy aspirations and high ideals that prized dignity and moral worth and placed honor and virtue before the pleasures and gain that preoccupied boorish and uneducated minds. It further represented the social spirit that came from a maturation of man's innate sense of fellowship and gentleness and that extended beyond social graces and good manners and humanism to a broader humaneness and sociability that made possible a secure and civilized way of life in an orderly and harmonious society. Cicero goes so far as to present *humanitas* as the difference between ill-ordered societies with habits of violence and those where moral idealism had a place and where unity and order prevailed, protected by justice and a concern for peace. Excellence was, therefore, to his mind, a most important force in the creation of a proper political community, and another barrier to the onset of political and moral decline.

Once again, we can see that excellence in the minds of the Romans as that of the Greeks has to do with values and ideals rather than the expertness. It was the *summum bonum* of these two civilizations. For the civilization of the high middle ages excellence was sanctity and heroism. The saint and the knight were the ideal types because they both abandoned worldly success and material objects. The Emperor Charles V abdicated and entered a monastery. Al-Farabi, the 10<sup>th</sup> century Persian philosopher equated Plato's *Republic* with an idea of the city of excellence as a society which had for goal

the education of a philosophic elite. Therefore, what governs and in fact creates the idea of excellence in a society is its vision of reality, that which the society in question considers to possess ethical and practical virtues. Now, let us ask the central question: what is our idea of excellence? What do we consider to be the highest good toward which all our daily effort should in the end direct itself? Certainly we do not find heroism or sanctity among our contemporary values. And yet we do have, as we must, a concept of “becoming better” that gives vitality and creativity to our lives. How can we think of “becoming better” without supposing it to be an achievable goal? Aristotle argues that human beings define an ideal life by achieving happiness, and this can be done by living life to its full potential, by having a balance of moral excellence and righteousness in society.

Following Aristotle we can say that we would attain excellence if we learn how to live our lives in an ideal way, meaning achieving a balance of moral virtue and righteousness. Hegel would call this a “learning process” (*Bildung*). For Hegel, *Bildung*, while a formative movement of growth and education, requires undergoing and inhabiting a process of encountering and responding to the other, one that interrupts the stability and integrity of one’s knowledge and very being. To use Adorno’s words, there is in this process “a will on the part of the subject to jump over its own shadow.” One might say that this ethical choice making is a particular mode of intensifying a Socratic ethics of ignorance in which learning is haunted by uncertainty and aporia, an alterity immanent to life itself. Within this “Socratic” ethics of existence, to interrupt the stability and integrity of one’s knowledge and very being is, in a sense, to live a life which is made of moral choices.

Put differently, excellence is not just an ideal; it is a frame of mind. However, excellence unlike a utopia is not a systematic and systemic conception of a far better life achieved by human intelligence and will. Utopia is the life of our dreams made flesh. It is an imagined model waiting to be realized. It is the image of a perfect world. But humanity, as imperfect it is, cannot live in a perfect world. That is why utopian dynamics have always been imposed views. Excellence, on the contrary, does not seek to impose itself upon others. It is a common horizon of exemplarity for all humans. Excellence is life within life where exemplarity is maintained

through individual's commitment to excellence as a noble state of mind. There is no sense of community possible without excellence, because the quality of people living together is based on the quality of their excellence.

A competitive society, one that divides people into winners and losers, breeds the absence of excellence. The Hobbesian man, the man who is a selfish beast who cares for nothing but his own well-being, is not a human in pursuit of excellence, but a brute. Thus, excellence is the midwife of true selfhood. This is the moral ideal with which civilization begins and the one with which it survives. Therefore, excellence is not about enforcement of what is good and what is bad. It is not about being rich and famous, nor is it about political ambitions. It is neither a renunciation of the world nor nostalgia of other worlds. It is the adoption of a noble attitude to life which has always been symbolized by the concept of "wisdom". As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu says: "To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day".

Socrates put this view in his own words when he insisted that the philosopher is a lover of wisdom and that the wise man is a man in pursuit of excellence. Excellence is the parameter of human dignity and worthiness that Socrates sought when he wanted to find the meanings of truth and freedom. The principal achievement of this experience is to overcome immaturity and to deepen the mind through thinking. As such, the beginning of wisdom is found in thinking critically; by thinking critically we come to the question, and by questioning we may come upon the truth. The art of Socratic questioning is important for the critical thinker because the art of questioning is important to excellence of thought.

There is no search for meaning in the face of life's, fragility and finality without the process of questioning. Human life is not just a random act of living in the present, but also that of living in thought. As such, philosophy has a projective dimension in the lives of human beings in a society. There can be no thought of life without a life of thought. As such, in pursuit of excellence, we cannot help asking questions about the meaning of our time and our relation to it. But to do that, one has to expose oneself to what Hannah Arendt calls "the junction points of life". Being exposed to the meaning of life is to be gripped by the idea and the passion that life and thought are one. It means simply that one places one's

thought at the very corner of one's life and at the same time takes the theme of human life as the main axis of the process of thinking. This process of thinking has always been in relation with the simple fact of being born in a world where life has no other goal than living among others.

If thinking and aliveness become one, then certainly one can get to the conclusion that human history is a meaningful process and a significant development of life and thought. Therefore, life is not only something which is "already there" (*ein Vorhandenes*), but something which is "its own externality toward itself". In other words, thinking is an opening up to the world which goes hand in hand with acting as the institution and organization of a common world. It is a *kosmos koinos* (common world) in which each of us has his /her own *kosmos idios* (private world). That is to say, it is within the framework of the social-historical institution of the world that one can think and talk. So there is never any possibility of a *tabula rasa* and therefore the search for the conditions of thinking and acting can never be radical since we think and we act in history and with history.

Under these conditions the primary problem of any moral philosophy is the fact that humans have the potentiality to give their individual and collective life a signification that they have to make. We can interpret this phenomenon as the emergence in society of the possibility and the demand for excellence. We can call this an unavoidable effort at remaining true to the ethical, however precarious and difficult and uncertain. Remaining true to the ethical is to be reminded of a timeless ideal of excellence. It is a defiant act in situation of mediocrity and banality. That is to say the pursuit of excellence is a reciprocal relation to the ethical as a way of relating to truthfulness. Excellence is, hence, a hermeneutic act of remaining true to the ethical while engaging oneself to perceive the spirit of the other in a threefold perspective of mutuality, solidarity and hospitality.

As ethical categories, solidarity, mutuality and hospitality embody a dialogical function, but also extend the hand of friendship to others as an extension to the spirit which moves within them. Valuing hospitality, mutuality and solidarity could well act as a necessary antidote to the endemic fears that are the result of the misperception, misunderstanding and stereotyping of the other. It is in-

teresting that though people have discussed prejudice for centuries, they continue to type and stereotype each other, often perceiving others not merely as being different, but as inferior in their capacity to learn, make decisions and govern themselves. Therefore, the enemy phenomenon is a powerful excuse for not keeping in tune with the ethical. However, dialogical understanding as true matrix of pursuit of excellence generates a new approach to the phenomenon of civilization as a process of listening and learning. That is to say there can be no process of civilization making without a strong sense of empathy for other human beings as citizens of human history. A feeling of empathy is necessarily a matter of sharing life with others, recognition of the fact that in the context of human life certain others are similar to us as humans, though different from us as members of another tradition of thought. We can see from this that living in a tradition of thought is automatically accompanied by a sense of shared values with other members of the same community. But it has also to do with what we might call a universal impulse, in the sense that its orientation toward its own life experience is based on an understanding of other communities as different experiences of the same shared life.

Civilization is a difficult and daunting task. It is a never ending quest for excellence and exemplarity. It is the thin distance that mankind has placed between itself and barbarism. To learn to think beyond mediocrity, as an absence of excellence, we not only have to unsettle and shake up our well-entrenched concepts and categories, but our task is also to resist our comfortable and familiar ethical and political categories which turn us away from ethical and spiritual definitions of life and sink us deeper into barbarism. That is the reason why the pursuit of excellence represents a deep change in our being. It is not simply standing where we are in our particular worldviews and speaking it out to others and listening to others from afar. It calls for a true ethical challenge and a true responsibility, a willingness to revise and transform our global culture in a critical and dialogical way. But it also means that this consciousness of the ethical and this essential task of mutuality and togetherness is an effort of making a global ethics across cultures and religions. We should not forget that from the acceptance of mediocrity to barbarism is only one step. If we wish to resist the tendency of our civilization toward mediocrity, we need to liberate ourselves from



any self-imposed dependency; otherwise we should be prepared to accept barbarism. Let us repeat that the pursuit of excellence is the greatest gift human beings have, but it comes into real life only by taking place among human beings. It is only then that thinking freedom and freedom of thinking can get together. It is not because one has lost freedom of thought that thinking freedom becomes impossible. But there can be no real freedom without a life of the mind. Because thinking life makes life more exciting and a life of thought makes the person conscious about his/her capacity of being free. The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka once wrote: “A life not willing to sacrifice itself to what makes it meaningful is not worth living”.

For those who believe in life as excellence, life itself is its own excellence. Striving for excellence is a sure way to make our life stand out of mediocrity, because excellence is a better teacher than mediocrity. It is a task, not a given. It is the gradual result of always striving to do things in a spirit of nobility and exemplarity. It would be wrong, therefore, to think of excellence as a state of perfection. Perfection is not the only alternative to mediocrity. A more ethical alternative is excellence. When we live in excellence, we might not know what ideal aspect is present in our life, or in the life of another. But we surely know that if there is a pursuit of excellence, it is about living our lives as nobly and as ideally as possible 