LCL BRIEFING #4

Life and Death

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Painting by Larry Pray

Some Good and Evil Reflections on Life and Death: Fairness and Freedom

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[Introduced by Jim Cochrane, with his comments incorporated in the text]

Introductory Remark: *What follows was prompted by particular circumstances, the death in a tragic accident while travelling in Australia of a 20-year old young woman, followed by the passing away of her beloved 71-year old grandmother the morning after the news broke; in grief, she literally died at the breakfast table, of a broken heart. Many outside this family, and perhaps one or two inside it, thought or said one of two things: either this double-blow was punishment for some 'sin', perhaps unfaithfulness or lack of belief; or, it was predestined, that is, all part of 'God's inscrutable plan'. These familiar refrains are devastating, because they misunderstand life and they misunderstand death, and because they lay a heavy burden on those who suffer the loss. The reflections below call all of this into question. They are shared with you even though they are to partly expressed within a monotheistic faith framework not shared by everyone, because they are generally relevant to a key question that has arisen repeatedly in our discussions around the Leading Causes of Life:* **what do we mean when we speak of 'life'**?

Deuteronomy 30:19 portrays God as speaking: "… I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you and your offspring may live." We have this text on the LCLI website; but perhaps we must look at it with a different orientation than the original? That's what I believe must be the case.

In the Deuteronomic author's worldview, what is "set before" us is an external, theonomous, moral law that we are called to fulfill, *or else!* Or else what? Or else we will be punished with death, because the *covenant* with God is that, if we keep God's law, God will sustain us and give us prosperity/good (Deuteronomy 30:15). The choice that the individual or the community here faces is clear: Either adherence to God's law, or death. Why then would or do we conform to divine law? – *Out of fear of the consequences*.

Another view: Aristotle begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* with the formulation of a theory of "moral virtue." This is the individual's pursuit of excellence with respect to those things in life for which one can have "more or less." Here Aristotle acknowledges that some behavioral standards are not absolute: a) What is "excellent" for one individual is not necessarily the same for everyone (e.g., we all have different physical metabolisms); and b), as a consequence, each individual must cultivate her/his moral habit with respect to the "more or less." Yet this is not a theory of moral relativism; Aristotle's flexible "moral virtue" is governed by an absolute "intellectual virtue": Excellence!

The *Nicomachean Ethics* continues with a discussion of justice (distributive and retributive). Again, neither is absolute, because there is a kind of proportional or arithmetical calculation required for determining what is proper in each case. Only at the end of the *Ethics* does Aristotle address directly those moral maxims that are absolute and unchanging (e.g., one shouldn't lie or break a promise). These maxims refer to our experience where there is no "more or less" involved: One cannot "more or less" lie, "more or less" break a promise. After ten books of discussion of humanity's amazing range of moral capabilities, Aristotle ends the *Ethics* on a pessimistic note (which may be meant ironically, intended to inspire rather to justify neglecting moral effort). He judges that most people are too lazy to cultivate moral and/or intellectual virtues and will choose to pursue selfish interest; therefore, we need the state to *force adherence to moral maxims, again (like the Deuteronomic worldview) out of fear*.

Anyone familiar with the "Leading Causes of Life Initiative" will immediately see that *both* Deuteronomy's theonomous *and* Aristotle's political ethic (perhaps ironic in the case of Aristotle) are an **ethics of death**, because they appeal to fear as the motivation for moral effort. *The negative is what drives them*. In neither case is one motivated to do good (i.e., to do the right thing merely because it is right and not because it enhances one's own or one's group self-interest) on the basis of one's "God given"/*natural* moral capacities. Rather, one is always having to "look over one's shoulder" to see who is watching and judging what one does: God or the state. When it comes to the state, in fact, all one needs is to *appear to be good*; one does not at all have to *in fact* be good in order to prosper. One is "innocent until proven guilty," which, though a powerful strategy to protect the weak, also dramatically opens the barn door to any and all (successful) deception.

Fear and punishment cripple humanity's moral efforts. Not only do they reduce morality down to "self-interest," but also they shift the moral focus, with respect to *who* is responsible for the moral order, to "God" or the state. As Plato reminds us in Book II of the *Republic*, the gods appear to be unjust because they allow themselves to be manipulated by flattering attention through the 'right' rituals, prayers, and other supplications. And as I have already noted, it is a truism that the state is an imperfect guarantor of justice/virtue, because adherence to the law does not necessarily mean that one is virtuous (it can sustain exactly the opposite, in fact, as we all know).

By reducing morality down to what serves one's (and one's community's) self-interest, and by shifting responsibility for morality to God and/or the state (or any other external agent, for that matter), one encourages deception and the cultivation of the mere appearance of virtue as all that is necessary. One encourages death!

When it comes to the divine covenant, however, the undermining of morality is complemented by perhaps an even more pernicious aspect: Humanity is condemned for its limitedness. The logic of theonomous morality is: "You adhere to my law, and 'I' will protect you." The parallel logic is: "You violate my law, and 'I' will punish you." The unspoken logic in the Judeo-Christian scriptures thus follows (and creates great agony for many, including those who suffer inexplicable tragedy): If you suffer, then God is punishing you. Some find comforting the answer in the *Book of Job* (if one reads it straightforwardly)*: God ultimately is inscrutable to humanity and will restore all things. It is all too easy to forget, then, that in

the end Job himself has been rewarded for his righteousness in this life, but all of his earlier family members, employees, and those dependent upon his earlier prosperity suffer miserably, even to the point of death (it is left unstated whether they receive their "reward" or not in the next life). What kind of divine justice is it that ignores the “little people” of the world? What does such ignoring of “little people” have to do with the condemnation of humanity for its limitedness? *The Book of Job* straightforwardly read (see the note on this at the end) tells us to shut up, not to question “the ways of God,” because they are inscrutable to us.

We are caught, then, in an impossible trap: God establishes the conditions of our existence (we are imperfect), while expecting us to be perfect moral beings, with any lapse on our part being our personal failure worthy of (infinite) condemnation. Moreover, we must shut down our reflections before an omniscient and omnipotent deity who “has a plan.” Human limits here mean: Death. Yes, death, because the logic of the trap is this: even if it may not be obvious to us in this life that the just shall be rewarded and the unjust punished, it will be obvious in the next life. The focus of justice (both moral and intellectual virtue) is “after death”. We live in fear of moral failure in this life, and we die in fear of punishment in the next life.

There is another powerful reason why we would embrace such a narrative of fear and punishment: It has the benefit of taking away our personal responsibility for this life and this world, and in this way, it serves our self-interest. If God has a predetermined, inscrutable plan that the individual cannot change, and that plan “will bring everything out right” beyond the grave, then I need only fold my hands and believe. I can act boldly with respect to my self-interest, and still be confident that God will work out all of the consequences for the best in the end, as long as I believe. It’s not up to me, after all, how things unfold.

It should not be overlooked that this view is a “moral *narrative*.” There is nothing about our *natural* experience that is *not* an experience of limitedness (of understanding, and of grasping the consequences of our actions), nothing that remotely confirms that we *can* be perfect beings. Where then does our notion of the expectation to perfection come from (“salvation” from our limitedness, one could say)? From a *narrative* that we “hear” or read (in the scriptures), one that comes to us clothed, sometimes in the language of “Good News”!

But this is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, because this, as *narrative*, is actually a narrative of death, not life. What do I mean? In Greek, the term “narrative” is *mythos*. The crippling narrative of a morality governed by death can thus be called a myth. The myth here is double: it places humanity on the throne of God by expecting an inhuman perfection; and it substitutes God’s omniscience and omnipotence for our limited understanding/reason and powers. Myths are perhaps comforting; but they enhance the dangers for humanity – a (desperate?) need to confirm ourselves in a search for ‘perfection’, confirmed by others through the acknowledgement conferred on us by recognition, position, status and prestige.

A morality of life is different. To be sure, it by no means closes its eyes to the capriciousness of “fate” in this world. Horrible (even unimaginable) things can happen in our world – and human beings, the most dangerous species on this planet, more often than not perpetrate most of the unimaginable things. If horrible things can crush us and if humanity possesses such a destructive capacity, what can give us hope? The starting point of any and all hope must be the careful determination of just what our limits, but also our capacities are.

Among our limits, which require that we *accept* imperfection, are that: We have limited reason, we have a limited perspective, we have little or no control over the consequences of our actions, we are dependent upon material conditions not of our making, and we are dependent upon social institutions created by fallible humanity. Among our capacities, which make it possible for us to embrace life and hope for the enhancement of virtue in the world, is this: That we are the species that can, and must, *add to* appearances a variety of conceptual

schemes in order to understand, and to act in, the world (in short, we do not understand and act merely out of instinct). This is a limit in itself (we are not 'God' with a 'God's-eye' view), but at the same time, it is an extra-ordinary capacity.

It is a limit because, unlike other species that are pre-programmed, we must acquire symbol systems in order to understand and act. Not everyone possesses the same physical and mental capabilities to cultivate this capacity (and circumstances such as radical poverty, malnutrition, or abuse and lack of early childhood care can threaten the cultivation of this capacity). But *everyone* possesses the most powerful capacity that we *add to* the world of appearances, namely: Our ability to initiate a sequence of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own. This is a *natural* capacity to the extent that is an inexplicable "given" of our existence; at the same time, it is a natural capacity that *elevates us above nature* because we can do things that nature on its own cannot. It is precisely this *natural capacity that is above nature* that alone makes us the species capable of assuming moral responsibility for our actions.

The material world offers us no guarantees. Our very creative capacity, which gives us autonomy above nature, enables and even encourages us to *ignore our material limits* as we seek to create and do things that nature cannot do on its own. At the *natural* core of our existence, then, are not merely limits and an extraordinary capacity, but also *risk*. We can no more eliminate all risk in life than we can stop breathing and still live. Given our limits and our strengths, we are still at the mercy of the unexpected; any strategy that asks us to ignore these limits and risks is a strategy that encourages us to stick our head in the sand and to deny the creativity that is life.

The consequence of risk? We benefit when people exercise their creative capacities properly, and we suffer when anyone suffers. Our solidarity is anchored not in self-interest but in our moral capacities, and never alone – so that a "real" culture (of mutually supportive solidarity among humans) consists of that invisible social world that encourages us, as individuals and in groups, to exercise our autonomous freedom responsibly – all the while knowing that we cannot eliminate risk in life, and will have to deal with tragedy.

Where does this leave us with death? We can no more close our eyes to the reality of death than we can close our eyes and leave the consequences of our decisions and living up to God. Yet, we misunderstand death if we view it only as something *at the end* of life. Socrates misleads us by focusing on death as an unknown only with respect to the future. Two observations, at least, are important here:

1) There is no death *without life* – this is the heart of Paul Tillich's thesis in *The Courage to Be*. Death presupposes life, so that there can be no death without life: Life *is* the victor!

2) The role of death in the individual's life is ubiquitous, not simply *at the end* of life: Every moment of one's life is a negation of the moment that just was.

The negation at the core of any and all experience, however, is a *double negation*: a) It is an allowing of the passing or 'death' of the present into the past; and b), it is a negating of some possibilities in the present *and* the opening up of other possibilities *to enable life now and in the future*. Both aspects of the double negation involve risk *and responsibility*.

So death, in a profound sense, is both a *consequence* of our necessary limits (an unknowing at the core of life), and it *presupposes* the existence of our limits. Death is not sovereign over them, but always subservient to the emergence of new life breaking forth, of new possibilities within our limits.

Our limits make it possible for us to exist; and we are never more alive than when we are able to exercise our *autonomous freedom above nature*. Here we find the meaning of our lives – and the response to death: "Oh, death, where is your sting?" It is not a sting of annihilation, but a jab that motivates us to go forward, to exercise our creative capacities, and to assume personal

responsibility for them. It is also the prick that motivates us to stand in solidarity with one another ("little" as well as "great" people), fully aware that the exercising of our autonomous freedom, precisely because we are capable, remarkably, of doing so according to what is right because it is right and not in service of any self-interest, involves great risk both physically and with respect to personal self-interest.

Because the individual *must* not be moral (we are not forced to be), yet *can* be (by free choice); because we can be moral finally only by personal self-imposition of moral maxims (no one else can make that decision for us, or even know for sure what our maxim actually is or was in any given act of ours); because we only have control over *how we frame our decisions and actions* and never over their consequences – for all these reasons, and fully aware of the necessity of risks, we stand in need of, and must embrace, our solidarity with others to mutually encourage us to realize our fullest potential.

In short, fear, guilt, shame and the threat of punishment drive an ethics of death; what sustains an ethics of life are curiosity, imagination and solidarity – or put differently: creative freedom, responsibly exercised, in doing what is right because it is right.

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* *The Book of Job* poses many hermeneutic (interpretive) problems. Most scholars accept that the beginning and the end – which I take here as its message as most people read it – are likely to be later additions to an original set of dialogues between Job and his friends. This makes up most of the book. If one takes those dialogues as one's key, then a very different picture emerges: In the dialogues, Job vehemently rejects the three main orthodox arguments of the religious tradition within which he sits. The orthodox platitudes simply don't hack it, to put it simply, and he will not be put off by them in his complaint against God.

NOTES