

The Philia Proposal

Adapted from a presentation delivered in Vancouver, May 2001 by Jacques Dufresne.

I would like to share with you today some ideas about moral commitment, inspiration and social action.

These ideas occurred to me while thinking about persons I have come to know and that I like to think of as moral athletes. They are otherwise ordinary persons who would likely have led quite ordinary lives, but, when loss and tragedy struck and excluded them, their children or their loved ones from active social life, they chose to stay and care. Their commitment represents a moral summit, a spiritual Mount Everest. But even that comparison is wanting: climbers who reach the summit of Mount Everest quickly head back to altitudes where they can find oxygen. The persons I am thinking about remain on their moral summits day after day, year after year, long after they run out of the oxygen they need for their spiritual well-being. Onlookers, standing at a distance, reel at the thought of the effort demanded of them and wonder where sources of inspiration can be found to support them.

We tend to equate 20th century with war, destruction, and the worst crimes against humanity ever. But that is also the period during which, perhaps in response to the hardship, the sense of a moral obligation to care for suffering and the commitment to include those that are left out have risen to highest levels ever reached in human history. Thinkers, especially philosophers and theologians, have yet to develop a compelling conception of humanity, of the world, and of suffering that can make sense of and support the countless examples of moral excellence and courage on the part of otherwise ordinary people.

Christianity, we know, has been and still is a powerful source of moral commitment. This is visible in the work of Jean Vanier, for example. But today's high level of moral demand has two other, more recent but equally powerful sources in what are, ironically, two opposite philosophical traditions: idealism and materialism.

There is a story of how the frail and ailing Kant, a few days before his death, got out of bed to welcome a visitor and remained standing until his guest had been properly seated. Finding his breath, he explained: "I have not yet lost all sense of humanity". Inspiring this remark is one of the key ideas of Kantian idealism: objects are means to ends but humans, all humans, are ends in themselves and, as such, are entitled to unconditional respect. All human beings: Kant rejected all forms of racism, discrimination and exclusion. He once said that whenever he noticed outstanding moral behavior on the part of servants, he stopped to pay a silent tribute and would have bowed openly if prevailing customs had allowed him to.

The second source is modern materialism, the philosophy that claims to explain everything by the laws of the material world. It held out the promise that, with the progress of science and technology, want, hunger, sickness and suffering would one day be eliminated.

With respect to inclusion, idealism undermined the 18th century humanist belief that Reason was the one determining criteria that set humanity apart from animals - and from those many humans that appeared not to fully have the use of reason, as a result of age, sex, status, race or malady, thereby justifying their exclusion from active citizenship. Materialism entirely rejected the humanist emphasis on reason and, if anything, stressed the similarities and the continuities between humans and animals. Reason, they thought, was just one of many species-specific features that appear as a result of material causes described, in this case, by the theory of natural selection. From a materialist standpoint, temporary or permanent incapacity to fully use reason does not cut off persons or groups from the rest of humanity: it is merely a "problem" for science and social engineering to manage or resolve.

Together, these two traditions create a powerful sense of moral responsibility for inclusion and care. Unfortunately, they provide little moral oxygen for persons acting on those moral demands. Idealism demands that we act from a moral resolve to do what we know is right. Materialism, consistent with the belief that behaviour is conditioned by material causes, suggests that individual responsibility is irrelevant and that society only needs to be engineered for the desired behaviour patterns to occur, thus further contributing to the contemporary loss of authentic spiritual sources of inspiration.

This modern vision is a tale of two solitudes. On one side, there is the material world, governed by the blind and mechanical laws of matter, the stuff of science. On the other, the human realm, governed by personal responsibility, ideals and moral demands. The two were initially held together by the promise of science and technical progress to serve humanist ideals and to create a better world by the elimination of poverty, suffering and death. And, indeed, immense progress has been made in that direction. But suffering and death are still with us, inseparable from the human condition. And modern thought has failed to connect with a source of inspiration to deal with them on a daily basis. Instead it attempts to provide for motivation with formal obligations, set out in charters of rights that call for institutional solutions in terms of government services, programs and incentives. Material support and resources, as well as programs and services are of course important; but they are not sufficient. People and communities are not machines that react automatically to manipulation of their environment: they need to be moved, to be touched, to be inspired.

I would like to define **inspiration** as a source of energy that flows from a deep sense of agency and responsibility grounded in the intellectual and emotional conviction that one's soul is attuned in spiritual unity with the wide universe.

Because of that, our selves, our actions as well as those of others matter in ways that we cannot ever fully grasp or explain. **Motivation** is what is left of inspiration when acknowledgement of mystery is eschewed and when there is no longer belief in an inner source of action and responsibility. In its contemporary version, it rests on two disconnected elements: borrowing from the idealist tradition, it attempts to influence beliefs and engage emotions by defining moral ideals with the language of rational argument; drawing from the materialist tradition, it looks for external means and stimuli to condition the desired behavioural response. One could say that motivation is to inspiration what an hour on the treadmill is to a brisk hike up a mountain trail: a powerful, concentrated but impoverished and one-dimensional version of life's complex reality. We are short of moral oxygen, I think, because we confuse motivation with real inspiration.

Finding a source of real inspiration will require a vision of life that embraces modern science, contemporary moral ideals, as well as the reality of suffering and tragedy. I have found in the writing of Simone Weil a vision that, I believe, can carry us through in those moments when contact with suffering calls us to summits of moral life.

Weil is clearly within the modern materialist tradition in believing that human beings and communities are subject to the inflexible rule of material causes. But she sees this rigid order of things suffused with something akin to the smile of a loved one : Beauty. The experience of the beauty of nature, of artistic creation and of human beings, nurtures love and compassion and holds out the promise that, through the strength of persuasion, Good will ultimately come to rule over Necessity. With respect to death and tragedy, Weil thinks that, much as hurricanes do not take away from the beauty of the world, the turbulence within that we call suffering, tragedy or loss does not debase the dignity or beauty of human life, because this dignity is not grounded in material causes nor in will-power or reason, but in something more divine and universal.

She once wrote these revealing words to a friend who was warning her that, with her frail health, she was putting her great gift of intelligence at risk by seeking employment as a farm laborer:

'Yes, I too expect that exhaustion will cripple me intellectually; but fatigue can be a form of purification, of the same order as suffering and humiliation, and as such, it can also be a source of deep joy and spiritual nourishment. But why should I hold intelligence above all else ? It is such a fragile thing that prison and torture, and sometimes only words, are sufficient to break it. If that is the better part of me, then I have not much to protect: why should I spare myself ? But if there is more, if there is something that can never be broken, that is what I should treasure, and that is what I am looking for.' ¹

What, then, is that "something" ? Weil's answer may well hold the key to a vision that would provide the inspiration we are seeking:

“what above all else is sacred in all human beings is that inextinguishable part of our beings, deep within our heart, which, from childhood to the grave, and despite our experience of evil done, suffered or observed, never ceases to expect that good rather than harm will befall it.”²

What renewed concept of social action can this vision inspire and support ?

I've entitled my answer to that question the “Philia proposal”. “Philia proposal” may remind some of you of “Paideia proposal”. This is no accident. Paideia is the Greek for “education”. As Jaeger reminds us, the Greeks thought that learning required a social and symbolic environment consistent with what is taught. Imagine Plato standing on the Acropolis, expounding his concept of harmony with, in the background, the Parthenon, the very embodiment in stone of the Greek sense of measure, proportion and harmony. “Paideia proposal” is the innovative education program, launched in the early eighties by Mortimer Adler, Jacques Barzun, Richard Hunt and others, who were inspired by the Great Books approach and by this idea of learning and education.³ Their aim was to re-think education in America and turn it into a Socratic dialogue with the classics and the great works of Art. What Paideia proposal is to the care of the mind, the Philia proposal is to the care of the soul.

Philia is the Greek for “friendship”. Aristotle calls Philia the force of caring that binds citizens together in a city: the reserve of human warmth, affect, enthusiasm and generosity that nurtures and stimulates the fellowship that is the heart of civic life. Nurture is the operative word here. Philia is to the community what topsoil is to farmland. It nurtures the soul and enables the citizens to fulfill their obligations with joy. Paideia educates us as citizens, gives us a sense of the common good, helps us set moral goals, and provides us with the means and the information to achieve them. Philia provides the inspiration, the moral oxygen needed to carry out our moral obligations as citizens.

The Philia proposal is grounded in the three following principles :

- Being is both the end and the condition of doing;
- Aesthetics and Ethics converge and reinforce each other; and
- Resilience is the key lever for social action and change.

Being and Doing

Communities are to being what associations are to doing. Associations are created for specific purposes or activities, and, usually, for a limited period of time. Communities are rarely “created”, though this may happen; rather, they tend to develop and grow, sometimes in unpredictable ways, as people are born into them or choose to move into them and, as a result, come to share a common space, common resources and, eventually, a common sense of history and identity. A community is a place to be and, also, the place from which associations form for the purpose of doing. This is why there is more room for the

“soul” in a community than in an association, and why associations tend to be less inclusive than communities. There is a risk that modernization, with its emphasis on doing as opposed to being, may be transforming our communities into mere associations as the sense of shared space and the idea of common good are eroded to provide more freedom to a privileged few. Ensuring that our communities remain inclusive is a survival strategy for communities that need a balance between the values of being and of doing.

Aesthetics and ethics

I am using the word “aesthetics” here in both its broad sense: the relationship to the world through the senses, and its narrow sense: the Arts. The gap between ethics and aesthetics is a characteristic of North America. When our ancestors, European for the most part, settled this land, they brought along their values and traditions: their ethics; but they left behind the matching aesthetics, the human and physical environment in which their values and traditions had evolved: the streets and cities, the churches and fairs, the country landscapes that reflected age-old patterns of life, all that which supported, illustrated and reinforced their ethics. The North American environment was shaped too rapidly for the long and undirected process of evolving aesthetics to match ethics. Could this gap be the cause of our restlessness, as if doing more could compensate a deficit of being, and acts of will replace the slow shaping of communities to reflect their values ?

Let me illustrate the link between aesthetics and ethics with these two excerpts from Lewis Mumford’s “Culture of Cities”, inspired by the city of Florence.

“This daily education of the senses is the elemental groundwork of all higher forms of education: when it exists in daily life, a community may spare itself the burden of arranging courses in art appreciation. Where such an environment is lacking, even the purely rational and signfic processes are half-starved: verbal mastery cannot make up for sensory malnutrition”.

“Life flourishes in this dilation of the senses: without it, the beat of the pulse is slower, the tone of the muscles is lower, the posture lacks confidence, the finer discriminations of eye and touch are lacking, perhaps the will-to-live itself is defeated. To starve the eye, the ear, the skin, is just as much to court death as to withhold food from the stomach... the town itself was an omnipresent work of art; and the very clothes of its citizens on festival days were like a flower garden in bloom.”⁴

Resilience

One cannot create, plan or even attempt to rebuild a city like Florence. It has to grow - like an ecosystem. And this is why cities like Florence and regions like Tuscany can be said to be resilient. Left to themselves, they evolve, grow new centres and repair local damage without ever losing their organic harmony. This is apparent in Frances Mays’ beautifully illustrated book on Tuscany which shows

how public places invite and support a sense of community reflecting Philia values.

Resilience is the bouncing back of an ecosystem, human or physical, individual or collective, to its original form after a shock or a stress. This concept is closely related to Philia by the emphasis on interconnectedness. Aristotle thought that human beings are by nature political animals - *zoon politikon* - meaning that it is in their very nature to live in communities. Thomas Hobbes, who inspired a certain form of liberalism, believed the opposite to be the case: that man is a wolf to man - *homo homini lupus*. Adopting the Aristotelian rather than the liberal perspective has important consequences. Social engineering corresponds to a vision of society as a passive machine, an artificial collection of private individuals. The Aristotelian concept of society as a living community of social animals requires what I would call a “natural model of social action”, a model inspired by Hippocratic principles, the first of which is “firstly, do no harm”: *Primum non nocere!* Social change in this perspective consists chiefly in removing obstacles to communities’ self-healing powers. Five types of social actions flow from this natural model for social action :

- Liberating actions
- Inhibiting actions
- Catalytic actions
- Nurturing actions

Liberating Actions

A liberating action removes the obstacles that prevent people’s natural sociability. Some of these obstacles can be legal, financial, psychological and institutional. Our systems of caring have often unwittingly created dependency on services. Creating individualized funding or direct payments could be an example of a liberating action.

Inhibiting Actions

These actions are about avoiding or stopping certain behaviours. For example boycotting a certain product or socially irresponsible corporation are inhibiting actions. ‘Turn off the TV Week’ or ‘Buy Nothing Day’ are other examples. Producing consumer guides and rating systems promote inhibiting actions. In social services stopping the use of terms like client and caseload could inhibit the treatment of people as objects within the system.

Catalytic Actions

Catalytic actions could also be considered homeopathic. They are the small actions of ‘the right dose at the right time.’ When the timing and dose are just right the effect is large. Such actions may trigger a breakthrough in how people or communities view themselves. Our systems of care often override timing or prescribe the same dose for everyone.

Inspiring Actions

Inspiring actions connect people to meaning. They remind us that there is something larger than ourselves. Viewing art, writing or reading poetry, engaging in dialogue and walking in a beautiful garden can all be acts of inspiration. How can our systems of care inspire both those giving and receiving care?

Nurturing Actions

People and communities need daily nurturing to remain intrinsically at their best. Nurturing actions consist of planning time and space to make room for the small miracles of daily life: the sense of wonder one feels at beauty glimpsed in a finely crafted object or furniture, a painting briefly lit by a ray of sunshine... As Blake said :

*He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise*

Perhaps we need to learn to see eternity's sunrise in the smile of the strangers we meet and that, smiling back, we choose to include in our world.

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1. Simone Pétrement, *La vie de Simone Weil*, Fayard, Paris, 1973, Vol. 2, page 346
 2. Simone Weil, *Écrits- de Londres et dernières lettres*, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 13.
 3. Mortimer J. Adler, *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York 1983, p.8.
 4. Lewis Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, Harvest HB 187, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., New York, 1970, p. 51.