

From the Acknowledgements to 'The Art of Fairness'

This book is dedicated to the memory of Kathleen Griffin, with whom I shared most of my twenties, when we lived in a little village in the foothills of the Alps. She'd faced harsh experiences in her life, yet drawn the conclusion that she'd do what she could to help others facing their own difficulties. That's the reason I find positive choice so admirable in this book.

This is little use if it comes out as a naive blandness, but from Kathleen's Cornish, Irish and French ancestry no one was ever going to accuse her of being bland. She had a remarkable ability to swear fluently in several languages; she succeeded in the competitive world of national broadcasting as well. But she also for years was the kindest of BBC trainers, helping novice journalists who were at times almost overcome by their awkwardness.

When practical action was called for, she was there too. At a lake near our village once, when a friend got into trouble in deep water, she shot towards him from shore even as the rest of us on land dithered and wondered what to do. Although he was a strong man, and ailing desperately, she had him steadied and safe by the time anyone else made it there; when we did get him back, she sat with him quietly, soothingly, so that along with his physical recovery he'd not be embarrassed at so losing composure in the water.

Had I been a better person, I'd have appreciated her more. That I didn't is one of the great regrets of my life. The desire to do better – perhaps the central theme of this book – is one I far too well understand. ((I then go on to thank the many individuals who helped in the research and writing...))

From the 'Readings and Reflections'

The chapters in this book build on a multitude of thinkers who've reflected on the questions that the simple term 'fairness' opens up: what it might be, and what it's been thought to be; how it's been achieved, and how it's been blocked... Many of these discussions hinge on whether we think mankind is good or bad. The Bible of course is majestic in exploring both sides, with accounts such as the story of King David (start at Chapter 16 in the First Book of Samuel) revealing how this tears apart even the individual soul. Such duality is at the centre of much later

literature and memoir, extending into a prison camp's depths, as with Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*:

If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people some-where insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

That's what the recognition of ambiguity in the introduction picked up on; the entire Bligh story at the pivot of this book (in Chapter 7) as well.

Classical authors were fond of writing life stories that encouraged us to land on the better side of this line, and Plutarch's *Lives* was yet another model for this book: with its ingenious pairing of biographies; with the way he reveals character not through abstract descriptions, but through recounting deeds. The failure, alas, of such guides over the millennia – on to the many Renaissance handbooks of manners they inspired – has been impressive to behold.

A great complication is that what authors such as Plutarch counted as noble wasn't necessarily what their soon-to-be-invaded neighbours did. A Roman Emperor might be considered magnificent for expanding the state's frontiers; we today are just as likely to consider the villagers on the other side of the frontier who were killed in that expansion. The questions that raises about the possibility of finding a universal standard also fill countless shelves. Who's to say when one person's gain outweighs another's loss?

I mention Jonathan Wolff's notion of viewing ethics not as a set of axioms to be put in tidy order, but as tools to engage the world with – in other words, more like medicine than like physics; and Amartya Sen on how we can care about injustice, even when we're not quite sure what perfect justice might be.

Isaiah Berlin was warier in what he thought possible, and since he had a brilliant mind – plus dictated most of his work – his published writings are charmingly readable. His *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* makes about as strong a case as possible for never pushing too hard for social reform in any one particular direction. But yet, the limitations of a largely cloistered existence come out in comparison with a man whose life was far rougher, yet whose voice is the very definition of well-based decency: George Orwell. In a way that's hard to pin down, Orwell's own collected *Essays* are more realistic than those of Berlin or a number of similar thinkers. In the course of Orwell's essays, faith in the common man – on which the quest for fairness depends –

isn't a cold logical premise. It's what life itself reveals. at feeling stretches across William Blake's simple, haunting *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* – a work which, along with Plutarch, also helped my structuring of this book.

There are several thousand more words, exploring the works suggested by each chapter, before these Readings and Reflections end:

...If Roosevelt had foundered, demagogues could easily have taken over, as many commentators at the time thought possible. William Manchester's *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur, 1880–1964* describes one likely candidate. The novel *All the King's Men*, by Robert Penn Warren, although not directly based on the life of the crowd-rousing Huey Long – the man Roosevelt considered the most dangerous after MacArthur – is excellent on how charismatic leaders twist all the tools we've seen to corrupt those near them.

That was the reason the final half of the book had to be a dual biography, matching what Blake understood. Roosevelt and Goebbels – it could have been Hitler, but Goebbels's role in distorting communications made him especially relevant today – each reveal key operations of the human mind, and in particular how we configure those operations in different ways: that underlings can be respected or not, outsiders can be accepted or not, and all the rest. The clarity that comes from such contrasts is a fundamental property of how we think. (Linguistics scholars, for example, note that a sound only seems high in pitch when we can compare it to a sound we call low.)

The point isn't that it takes a comparison with Roosevelt to conclude that Goebbels was bad. It's that, as noted, without such comparisons we'd get little of the crucial detail about what makes each side work, and what makes them fail. Goebbels's exaggerating of crowds and trying to close down newspapers that disagreed with him and vilifying opponents is now just a historical curio; the strengths of Roosevelt's reverse operations are clear. But had he been less skilled in carrying them out, one can only wonder at how differently history – facing challenges Roosevelt couldn't have envisaged – might have turned out.