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The Moral Duty of Promoting Political Conflict

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> Man wishes concord, but nature, knowing what is good for the species, wishes discord. Man wishes to live comfortably, but nature intends that he should abandon…self-sufficiency and plunge into labour and hardships, so that he may by his own adroitness find means of liberating himself….[T]he finest social order man creates [is] the fruit of his unsociability….Without…[our] asocial qualities, human talents…and rationality…would remain hidden….A society which has…the greatest freedom…has the greatest antagonism among its members, and the most precise specification and preservation of the limits of this freedom.

The dark views that Kant expresses in *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1787) provide us with the best answer to the question posed to Socrates: "Can virtue be taught?" They also provide the best answer to a pressing contemporary question: "Should virtue be taught in the public schools of a liberal democracy?" Before turning to a significantly modified version of the second question, let's follow Socrates in beginning with a few distinctions between varieties of teaching, varieties of learning and varieties of virtue.

Teaching: well, there is telling, and come to think of it, there is telling and telling. You can of course try to *tell* people what you think is good; you can pronounce a set of principles, rules and maxims, ten useful bottom-line commandments with a few detailed guidelines on how to treat orphans and the beggar at the gates. You can tell them which is more important, loyalty to friends or loyalty to country; you can even try to train them in some version of moral reasoning, moral casuistry or moral calculus. Bitter experience of the inadequacy of such teaching explains why we came to think that learning to be good is not a matter of memorizing a set of moral rules and principles. However well the pupil can recite her lessons, she may still be a vicious rogue in action. Nor has she necessarily become a recognizably good person, if she can tell us how to apply those rules correctly. What matters is that her knowledge is, without much further ado, reliably and appropriately translated into action. It is for this reason that Socrates, Plato and Aristotle introduced the idea of *virtue*, as affecting the whole of a person's character; and it is for this reason that they insisted that it cannot be taught by telling or exhortation. Unless much, much more is in place, such teaching can go in one ear and out the other. And when all that necessary more *is* in place, it may not be your telling that did the work of teaching.

You can also weigh the imagination of your side, and tell powerful and moving stories of the trials of men and women in the face of good and evil. But those stories work best -- they capture the imagination without arming resistance -- when they are not marked as morality tales or tales of morality. *Everyman* and *Pilgrim's Progress* are more soporific than elevating. Victorian tales of the rewards of virtue and the terrors of evil are sugared water: they taste sweet, have no nourishment and rot the teeth. When tales of temptation are told for the joy of vivid and intricate telling -- when they really do awaken the imagination -- their moral implications are ambiguous. Indeed, free play is the heart and soul of imagining; but the whole point of such play is that there is no telling where it will go or what will happen, and there is no telling who will seduce your soul. That is why Socrates and Plato were suspicious about moral teaching that appeals to the imagination, and why Blake rightly remarked that Satan is the hidden hero of *Paradise Lost*. If you could choose between living the life of lusty Faust or that of faithful Marguerite, there is surely no doubt whose life you would

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choose, especially since you could count on sweet Marguerite to pray you into heaven after all. Given the choice, would you be Odysseus or Penelope? Raskolnikov or Sonia? Jacob or Esau?

There is yet another kind of telling: preachers of all kinds present models of rectitude for imitation. There are *Sunday Magazine* articles on Mother Teresa, PBS productions on worthy local volunteers, organizers for good causes. Remembering your own childhood, remembering the figures who profoundly influenced you, you will realize that you were as often taken by the individuality, the intensity of their style, their vivid way of walking and talking as by anything you might call their morality. In truth, you probably imagined more high or noble motives than you could possibly observe, or that they could possibly have lived out. Remember how we discovered that our heroes were frail by moral lights, often acting well by accident or against their wishes, pushed by circumstances into doing the noble thing. Schindler was a gambling womanizer who enjoyed high life with the Kommandant, Mother Teresa is a bigot, and the local civic volunteer is often primarily keen on getting into the best social circles. In imitating such models, we emulate a fictionalized, two dimensional projection of a figure who is, when truth is told, at least as frail and flawed as most of us. Which, then, tells the moral tale, the air-brushed, face-lifted story? Or the harsh truths of a complex life?

There is, finally, the less self-conscious and more subtle moralizing of ordinary praise and blame, envious gossip and deflating anecdotes. We control, regulate and direct one another all the time. Indeed it is idle to pretend that we could possibly stop trying to teach virtue. Like it or not, every lifted eyebrow, every shrug of a shoulder, every bureaucratic memo, every turn of every political and economic institution carries a moral lesson that etches its way into our habits. And who are the "we" who are such intrusive moral teachers? Every infant who cries, every parent who frowns, every friend favoring a friend and putting down a rival, every bank that charges interest on overdrafts, every postman who returns illegible mail, every teacher who marks errors with a red pencil. In all honesty, I have met the moral meddler; it is me and thee; and if truth be told, I cannot say I approve of what thou dost.

Perhaps we can make more headway by turning to varieties of learning. There is learning from the trials and errors of experience. Such learning comes in two varieties: unmanipulated experience and managed-care experience. Unmanipulated experience is raw; its moral outcome is uncertain. Having learned that hitting only works for the strong and powerful, we will learn to make our way by flattery and subtle forms of bribery. Leaving morality to be learned from experience is a risky business: we may learn to manipulate your world well, but, seeing how things are, and are likely to remain, it is unlikely that we will become what the world considers a better person by this kind of learning.

Managed-care experience-based learning is another matter altogether. As Rousseau describes Emile's education, it was necessary to isolate him, to remove him from the give and take of family life, to limit his reading and keep him from the theater. Emile could properly learn from experience only when his experience was an experiment controlled by a benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent Tutor who regulated the events that presented Emile with occasions for learning, quite like the kindergarten teacher's ruse of asking children whether they would like their juice before or after their naps. And indeed when Emile and Sophie themselves became parents, they had to return to the Tutor for the education of their children, expressing themselves unable to do what he had done, despite their perfectly managed moral education. In spite of its dark irony, there is a lesson to be learned from *Emile*; Rousseau himself drew that lesson in the *Social Contract*. The educational experiments of *Emile* fail unless they are supported by a just political system, whose institutions frame an altogether different kind of teaching and learning from experience.

Before identifying the real teachers of real virtue, we need a quick survey of the origins of that concept. What we have come to think of as specifically *moral* goodness -- characteristically expressed in altruism or beneficence, presumably contrasted to nasty selfishness -- is a very late comer in the history of what we are pleased to call our moral ideals. Certainly neither Plato nor

Aristotle -- who introduced the philosophic conception of *arete* -- gave the term the post-Hobbesian connotations of "moral virtue." Their complex views ride on the back of Homeric tales of large-minded, bold and generous nobility -- by no means of a goody-goody kind, but one which gathered its own satisfactions, its own fulfillment, in a shining, visible, exuberant glory of what seemed to them human excellence. Of course it included fine and difficult deeds, originally in battle and eventually in civic life; and these were presumed to bring the goods of life, the respect of noble friends, a strong voice in public life, a thriving family, even wealth. The very traits that mark *arete* -- the stratagems of wily Odysseus, the bold cunning of Oedipus -- made them liminal figures: they are, to put it bluntly, great and generous figures who are, in their very greatness, also rogues and rascals. For all their outstanding kingly virtues, Odysseus was a pillaging pirate and Oedipus had a very nasty temper. Of course Homer and the tragedians understood that those ideals of grandeur raise formidable civic problems, problems that we have come to think of as the moral dangers of arrogant and ruthless heroic virtue.

Aristotle and Plato faced the questions that we evade. How can the traits and motives that make for shining excellence avoid the dangers of their perfectly natural -- indeed their built-in -- dangerously exuberant expression? For all their differences, Plato and Aristotle agree that the answer to the first question must go deep into an analysis of human nature, and into the conditions that make a political system thrive. They also agree that coordinating the metaphysical and the political criteria for virtue raises formidable problems, the fundamental theoretical and practical problems of ethics. But our present concern is the answer to the second question. Plato and Aristotle again agree: wisdom…and politics contain the natural excess of virtue. Wisdom first. The vicious are, in a way, simply stupid: They do not understand what a human life is all about; they try to grasp its prizes as if they could be detached from living well; and they reach for the benefits of virtue as if they were its point and aim. Plato and Aristotle disagree about the kind of intelligence that virtue requires: Plato thinks that philosophic ability and a philosophic understanding of the world is -- at least on the part of the rulers who articulate the customs and practices of the city -- a precondition for virtue; Aristotle thinks that practical wisdom, the ability to see -- to know -- the right thing to do, in the right way at the right time, is the necessary condition for living well. But they agree that mere cleverness is not enough to live well and shiningly, with *arete* and the good fortune of its benefits. Intelligence has to be embedded in a person's character; it must be manifest or expressed in the most minute habits of perception, emotion and desire. The task of teaching virtue -- the solution to the problem of moral education -- is that of infusing an intelligent understanding of what is good, of what is important, into detailed, active habits of action.

Although they are worlds apart in other ways, Plato and Aristotle agree with Rousseau that politics provides the answer -- if answer there be -- to the problems of moral education. It is the structure of the state -- its laws, its economy, its institutions, its public culture -- that form and direct the moral life of the citizens. In a way, intelligence must be the immanent guide to every individual life; but it is, in the end, intelligent public institutions that form the intelligent ethical character of its citizens. The answer to the question, "Who teaches virtue?" is, "The political institutions that frame our aims, our understanding of what life requires and, most significantly, that form our habits of mind and action." This does not mean that every polity can justify its own claims to wisdom and virtue, even though every polity, like every individual, naturally strives for its own best life. But since it is a polity's *conception* of its best life that guides its institutions, a polity -- any polity -- can get things wrong for centuries, perhaps forever.

But to see how that is so, we need to summarize a bit more history. Believing that we could recover the innate knowledge of good and evil assured by divinity, young Augustine could speculate on how we can read moral lessons from the Scriptures and the Book of the World. Post-Manichean Augustine took a more somber view: without divine redemption, without the grace of a good Will, we are, and remain in the natural fallen condition of sin. In either case, it is God, and only God who defines good and evil; it is he who makes virtue possible and who rewards it. It was all very well for Augustine, who never really abandoned either his neo-Platonism or his Stoicism, to claim that the

lessons of Grace coincide with those of the Scriptures and the Book of the World. But once those avenues of moral insight are represented by different political institutions -- once princes of the church, divinely ordained kings and natural law philosophers each have a legitimate claim to interpret and legislate God's moral law -- the stage is set for the long and bloody battles over which institutions should have the right and the power to form the morality -- the mentality and motives -- of ordinary men and women.

Renaissance theorists yet again transformed the Platonic-Aristotelian understanding of the deep connection between morality and political life. But they also set it stark new problems. Castiglione and Machiavelli agree about very little; but they agree that although princely excellence is essential to civic virtue, the honor and virtues of princes differ profoundly from the more docile, conventional virtues of ordinary citizens. They emphasize what Plato and Aristotle took for granted: that the habits and skills that constitute the virtues vary with class; and the "master virtue" -- the virtue that regulates all others -- should be the virtue of the rulers. Machiavelli argues that the life of a city depends on its security, which in turn depends on the power of its prince. To assure civic peace -- not to mention civic glory -- the Prince must have ruthlessly good timing, quick intelligence, and secret intelligence; he must know how to inspire fear and he must command a vast array of morally neutral practical skills. Machiavelli's sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued account of the benefits of the Prince's anti-virtues brought new complications to our understanding of the connection between politics and virtue. What is to contain the boundless excesses of admirable, licensed, princely virtuous anti-virtue? Will princely *virtu* know when and how to restrain its own habits?

Hobbes and the tradition of the Social Contract have an answer to the question: Who is to guard the guardians? Or, as Marx put it more seriously: who will educate the educators? Superficially, Hobbes's answer seems to be the old answer: it is reason -- the intelligence manifest in political sovereignty -- that prevents men from harming each other. But Hobbesian rationality has transformed the Platonic-Aristotelian intelligent understanding of what is genuinely good into prudential reckoning at the service of desire. At best, we can hope that the quest for satisfaction will be self-correcting. The contractarian tradition that emerges from Hobbes to Rousseau is united in agreeing that the state provides the basic political conditions that are necessary for citizens to lead a good life. Individual citizens freely consent to the state's power to constrain their activities because they believe -- rationally so -- that it is in their interest that the state should command such power. But Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau are deeply divided about the extent to which the state is responsible for the details of moral education; and they are deeply divided about how the state should exercise its educational obligations.

Minimalists like Hobbes think the state's primary moral obligation is negative. Like Machiavelli, they think the sovereign is duty bound to inculcate a healthy fear of the consequences of (what the sovereign defines as) wrong-doing, but unlike Machiavelli, they think that fear is best assured by the sovereign's impersonal monopoly of power, its control of laws and sanctions, rather than by the prince's personal *virtu* of style and timing. Proceduralists like Locke argue that the state must protect the liberty as well as the lives of its citizens; and since the protection of property is essential to the protection of life and to the effective exercise of liberty, the state is also duty-bound to secure the property of its citizens. Maximalists like Rousseau extend the state's obligation to protect citizen security and liberty still further. Rousseau thinks that men only become truly rational and truly free in the act of becoming self-legislating citizens. Until then -- until they have become both sovereigns and subjects -- they only have (what passes for) prudential cunning and unfettered mobility. In their personae as sovereigns, citizens must promote the conditions in which they, as citizen-subjects, can fully achieve their rational autonomy. To protect its citizens from harm, the state must also protect them from moral harm; it is obliged to exercise censorship, regulate assemblies, promote civic religion. In preserving his liberty -- in providing the conditions for the freedom of rational self-legislation-- each citizen accords all others the equal right of active political participation. As Rousseau puts it dramatically, speaking of the state in the first person: "We will force men to be free." Does the force of the moralizing state shatter all thought of real freedom? Rousseau's reply is:

1) if we *consent* to these strictures and directives, we are also legislating them for ourselves; 2) it is rational to consent to constraints and directives that preserve and empower us; and 3) freedom is preserved, rather than limited, by rational consent. It is the only way that the equation between desire and reality can be asured.

So far we have been talking about how we teach and how we learn what, according to our lights, passes for virtue. The more difficult question is: how can *real* virtue best be conveyed from one generation to another? The answer to this question must leave us with a bitter after taste. We can probably agree that we have a reasonably sound and clear idea of the minimal negative virtues: "Thou shalt not kill, steal, harm your fellows." We probably agree also that these lessons are taught early and strongly by everyone and everything in a society, even when the advantages of violating them are visible all around us. Minimal negative virtue is most reliable when it has become second nature, when we wholeheartedly *want* to abide by its strictures, without further calculation and without the secondary reactive resentment that bides its time and secret place for counter attack.

But minimal negative virtue produces no more than a reliable promise keeper, a well-tamed creature, certainly not yet someone who knows what promises are worth making. How can citizens become reasonably good neighbors, ready to do a good turn without calculation of gain, willing to take some risks to speak and act against what seems wrong, prepared to extend themselves for what seems good? How can we develop the habits of those whose friendship we shall cherish, on whose presence we shall rely, people with an inventive moral imagination? How can we arrange matters so that their lives form a seamless whole, with their economic and professional activities, their friendships, their civic and domestic lives all moving them in the same direction? How can we so arrange matters that -- without doing a breath of harm or injustice to either, without reducing either to the other -- the activities and goods of public life and those of private life coincide?

It is possible -- rare, but notionally possible -- that a person could become good on her own, against the grain of her society, through the sheer force of intelligent reflection, or by the good luck of encountering an exemplary figure. It can also happen that, even in the midst of corruption, an extraordinary family manages the job well across several generations. But if you want to know how perfect virtue -- as it might exist in the fantasies of an omniscient being -- can be successfully conveyed across generations, the answer is: forget the dreams of perfection. We are too gnarled, our individual activities and desires cannot be readily internally coordinated, let alone mutually harmonized in the social and political systems through which and in which we live. The burden of the past is too great; time is too short. Even with the inherited wisdom of past experience, we are -- individually and collectively -- too stupid to take all that deeply matters into account. Striving for perfect virtue may prevent our doing what we can, where we can. A resolute and single-minded attempt to set aside our miserable failures and to start from scratch in constructing a polity may well end by making matters worse. After all, we have been formed by our history. If reconciling ourselves to our forbearers means -- as it does -- reconciling ourselves to their ineradicable presence within us, then we cannot simply set aside our miserable failures. They are part of what we are, if only because they form our imagination and direct our hopes.

One thing seems clear, indeed trivially clear: the better the political and economic system, and the more just are social arrangements, the easier it is both to be and to become what we are pleased to call "morally decent." The worse social and political and economic arrangements are, the more difficult it is to present good lives as rewarding models, the more difficult and the more costly it is to integrate personal satisfactions with public decency. This should not be surprising. After all, a good polity is one in which the activities and traits that conduce to the public good are, at the very least, in harmony, if not actually identical with those also exercised in the long range flourishing of individual lives.

What, exactly, does this mean? The fine details of our strivings, our hopes and desires are directed by what we envision as the fulfillment of our lives. The complex pattern of our desires -- our projects and motives -- are formed by our social arrangements, by our early experiences of the

activities of those around us, by what they say in their unguarded moments, and -- crucially -- by what comes of their projects, by whether their activities bring them the goods that are the natural objects of every human desire, the abstract forms of our activities. And what are these guidelines of virtue? At rock bottom, so obvious as not to need mentioning, we --whoever we are, wherever and whenever we live -- seek sustenance, safety and pleasure. Of course we can, like Nietzsche, decide to set these inclinations aside as unworthy in comparison to more noble ideals. Still, in doing so, we find that we cannot avoid having to take these active natural tendencies into account, if only to subdue or transform them. But security and pleasure are just part of what motivates us. We want our best abilities to be well developed and expressed in activities that are significantly connected with those of our fellows; we want those activities to come to an appropriate fruition; we want to take an active part in the determinations of civic life; we want the approval and admiration of our fellows -- we want their recognition to be focused on our own sense of who and what we really are; and we want to reconcile ourselves to our forbearers and to have our projects continue beyond ourselves, to our descendants. These are the most general, formal directions of our lives. A political and social system is good to the measure that its institutions and customs, its modes of production and reproduction, its poems and songs -- its cultural self-representation -- promotes the basic goods of its members, expressed in all of these complex terms. But this also means that a political and social system is good to the extent that it does not misrepresent its own directions, believing one thing about the ways it actually structures our lives and actually doing something quite different.

Our second question was: should public schools in a liberal democracy engage in moral education? That question should be rephrased. After all, virtually every public institution -- not only the public schools, but also the courts, the legislature, the mass media, the medical and financial establishments, government agencies -- are actively engaged in moral education.

To consider whether *we* should allow -- or perhaps even command -- our public institutions to engage in moral education, we need to say something about who and what *we* are. We are a pluralistic society, whose citizens rightly or wrongly believe themselves to disagree about many morally charged issues. The principles embedded in our form of a liberal democracy express the conflicted layers of our political history and the complexities of (what we take to be) our geo-political realities. However we may differ about virtually everything else, we all -- left, right, and center -- agree that we are in the midst of perilous times. The increasingly overt and sharp conflicts among the objective interests of different sectors of our society, the virtually universal acceptance of a division between private and public life seem overwhelming. Yeats puts it vividly: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world…and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Many of us -- left, right and center -- believe that this disarray is no accident; it is deeply embedded in our economic arrangements and in our cultural self-presentation and self-understanding. Political arrangements powerful enough to teach virtue are also strong enough to be effective teachers of vice. In our times, in this place, the most powerful and effective moral influence is the economy. We suffer the necessity of fashioning ourselves, forming our abilities and habits in such a way as to make ourselves employable; and worse, we suffer the economy's need to generate the inexhaustible and unsatisfiable desires that define and direct our activities. We have rebaptized greed: it has become the virtue of "taking the competitive initiative" and we have transformed prudence into short-term monetary cost-accounting. Our role -- our place -- in the economy shapes us; it specifies our virtues, determines our security and pleasures, and issues in the kind of recognition we receive. Our psychology -- as it includes our moral habits -- is profoundly influenced by the way that economics drives civic politics. Both, taken together, pervade absolutely every nook and cranny of our lives. To the extent that any part of the population is hopelessly and structurally excluded from this economically driven civic life, to that extent they have no objective reason to enact its virtues, realistically having no stake in the life those virtues serve and express. Whatever we may say and try to do along the lines of religion and morality and nobility and goodness and right and whatnot

perforce must confront and comply with the harsh realities of the economic structuring of the "virtues." Of course we also continue to admire fairness, justice, even generosity and kindness. But these ancient virtues are no longer reliably connected with the general activities and goods that are the directions of every human life, and they are typically exercised at some cost to ourselves. Our admiration for them has become all the more fervent because we recognize that they involve effort and risk. We wisely try to convince ourselves that virtue is its own reward precisely because we realize it brings little else.

The answer to our second question is: By all means, yes; we should endorse what is, in any case inevitable. Our public institutions should actively engage in moral education, however that might best be done within the limits of our confused understanding and our pitiful abilities. First, however, we may differ about refined details of substantive morality, we do not, by and large, differ about minimal negative morality. Religious believers and militant atheists, adherents and opponents of capital punishment, pro-choicers and pro-lifers all agree that murder is wrong; all agree that the state is obliged to protect the rights of free choice. Certainly our public institutions should do all they can to promote minimal negative morality, being careful not to reintroduce disguised versions of the vices they want to eradicate.

Second, the virtues central to a liberal democracy should -- indeed inevitably must -- be expressed in, and promoted by all public institutions. A free society that does not develop the virtues of a free society will not long remain free, and may not long remain a society. But the civic virtues germane to a pluralist liberal democracy are extremely ramified -- they extend far beyond the indifference that we presently call "tolerance" and "mutual respect." A pluralist liberal democracy cannot survive unless its citizens have a high level of education, with a sophisticated and reflective understanding of political history; it cannot survive unless its citizens are actively and critically engaged in public deliberation about our middle-range goals and policies. Our pervasive economy gives this kind of education -- developing the complex abilities and skills required for serious inquiry -- high lip service and low actual priority. Our most serious practical problem -- our most serious moral problem -- is that many of the "virtues" endorsed by our economic arrangements are in considerable tension with the virtues of critically free, inquiring citizens. The very same institutions that convey our real virtues also -- often in the very same breath -- convey our real vices. To put it bluntly and most contentiously, our economy directs activities, forms desires that are as counter to morality, as much at odds with the virtues of critically free citizens, as the anti-virtues of Machiavelli's Prince. And because the "virtues" that are embedded in our economic and political arrangements are at odds with the quests we officially parade, they lead to the kind of self-deception -- a self-inflicted maiming of the mind -- that threatens the critical public inquiry and deliberation essential to a liberal democracy.

I have led us on a merry chase, and brought us to darkness. To summarize: The ultimate teachers of virtue -- and of vice -- are the laws, customs and institutions that form our mentality and habits; those virtues and vices span private and public life; they unite habits of mind with habits of action; every political system promotes the virtues that it believes are essential to it; the civic virtues essential to a liberal democracy are very far-reaching: they require us to develop habits of Socratic inquiry and Aristotelian deliberation. Ironically, those habits are as much at odds with our economically-driven political system as Socratic inquiry was with that of Athens. Strange as it may seem, the primary problems of moral education are exemplified in the life and death of Socrates. Although Socrates embodied many of the virtues that Pericles so eloquently described, his critical questioning was correctly perceived as a threat to authority as Athens conceived it. The state is endangered when the young see that the assumptions of their elders are easily unmasked, that their pretensions to wisdom evaporate under questioning. Of course, Socrates was charged with corrupting the young, with impiety to the gods of the city; and of course he was condemned as a traitor. The abilities, skills and habits of serious inquiry and public deliberation are central to a liberal democracy; those virtues inevitably lead us to question some of the most fundamental directions of our economically-driven polity. Conflict is the homage that a corrupt society pays to

morality. If Socratic questioners do not actually undermine the gods of the market place, if we do not unmask the pretensions to wisdom of our elders, we can -- we should -- at least attempt to promote specific moral conflicts among our fellow citizens. Indeed, perhaps the best we can do as moral educators is to promote moral conflict, to introduce it, in the right way at the right time, in the right place, for the right reasons.

We end where we began, with Kant's view that our abilities, the assurance of our freedom and even the promotion of social harmony are carried through stages of discord. "Without our unsociability… our asocial qualities, human talents and rationality would remain hidden."