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## Sharing The Common

### *1. A POET'S APOLOGY IS ALREADY COMMON GROUND*

Why ask a poet to write an essay about the things we hold in common? Seemingly it's rather a job fit for a philosopher, a statesman or perhaps a priest. The only things held in common that poets are notoriously answerable for are their own creative writing, or at most the writings of other poets. Actually society is quite ambivalent about poets. The roles for which we're enlisted – the rebuking social prophet, the “*artiste maudit*” as martyr, the jester or the troubadour: all are quite reductive or at least create an unhealthy model.

Why poets? We don't say it out loud but it often seems that the poet is the only one who can serve in this modern world as a metaphysical messenger of sorts, a representative of the subconscious, a martyr, or a prophet. If you interviewed people in our globalized culture, hardly anybody would explicitly confess he thought poets occupy any of these roles in the traditional sense, and if you ask poets they'll probably make clear that a poet really has other tasks to attend to, such as writing his works and earning a living. But perhaps we can still admit there's some truth in these feelings: even the most low-key poet is a rebel and a revolutionary who by his very creativity threatens the prevalent and familiar order of reality.

And still: why poets? What is it that poetry can say about human existence that we don't already have in our philosophy and history books? And how does the poet say it? In his true vocation a poet writes a poem, not an essay. In a poem written in 1982 in capacity

of a resident symbolic scholar, Geoffrey Brightstone expressed the following wish:

I wish that articles were short as sonnets,  
 and there would be no more than 14 lines.  
 Each line would make just one hypothesis,  
 And there would be no underground mines

With crooked caves replete with suffocation,  
 But fresh the air will be as on the mountains,  
 And words will gush released from their  
     fountains  
 Strong, tender, clear and free from affectation.

In that bright light of thoughts that can't be  
     dimmed  
 All morbid vagaries and nebulous ideas  
 Will die, will fade, garbaged away and  
     brimmed

To liberate us from the utmost fears,  
 All footnotes, bibliographies will disappear,  
 No thought will have a value unless rhymed.  
 Thus, faithful to my guild, I would like to  
 declare poetry and art in general as a basic set  
 of things we have in common: thought and  
 feeling, creativity, imagination, and sense of  
 freedom and beauty.

Poetry's attitude towards artistic creativity is an important factor in widening or narrowing the spiritual capacities of a society, and enhancing or weakening its creative imagination and vital powers. Philosophy, the famous authorized profession of our culture concerned with wisdom, becomes less convincing when one considers “wisdom.” Philosophy speaks about wisdom and insight,

but holds thought with thick pliers. Plenty of heavy slow words that clumsily catch hold of ideas, wisdom grasps in the blink of an eye. Only rare philosophers like Heraclitus, Plato or Nietzsche, who had poetic talent, could deal with this electric intensity of thought. It seems only poetry does to words what thought is doing to them, in their full power and scope: hears them, tastes them, understands and misunderstands them, combines them in strange ways, gets carried away by them, beats them against each other—and tells. Poetry truly tells through words everything they can grasp and more. Poetry holds words alive in the moment they're formed.

A society that fails in the field of art and literature is perhaps a society that has become mentally fossilized and harmed its own capacity for self-renewal and rejuvenation. After all, the history of human evolution is in fact the history of creative ideas: every achievement of humanity is an achievement of the human mind. Somehow a poet seems to create with the most primal materials, in the mental mass of life and possible realities. His works serve to enhance and reshape the world in which we live. A poetic insight can serve as a renewed perception of reality, and draw new sketches or blueprints for its future development. A writer just sits there and “dreams” the world anew, but in this very action he gives validity and meaning to reality; whether he is conscious of it or not, by his creative adventure the poet goes on creating the mental future from which tomorrow's civilisation will grow.

It seems thinkers, artists and researchers can proceed successfully along these lines too: experimentally we may play the role of a world government and deal with problems related to the commons politically, but in fact we can't offer pragmatic means to solve starvation, illiteracy, overpopulation or HIV. Actions to mend these ills are very much needed, but they're insufficient if we don't

find an operational ethical code by which we can protect ourselves against mental oppressions. It seems the most practical thing we can do is look for ideas, touch stones, keys, and normative models by which one might deal with the concrete situations of human achievements, disagreements and failures concerning the commons.

So here's a poem and an essay; but no quotes, no sophisticated conversation with generations of thinkers. Just a poet's opinion.

## 2. THE CATCH

### Succession

Appu, the first wise man, the half-human, was squatting, sticking out his lips, in front of the ears of barley which had grown from seeds fallen from his palm. For a moment he picked his nose thoughtfully; then stuck his finger in the wet soil, placed a seed in the hole and invented agriculture. That's how, say the ancient texts, Appu lay with the earth. In one syllogism, Appu saved man from the darkness of the eternal present and gave him past and future; with one syllogism he taught people to desire what's absent. This is how Appu entered the cave of death and discovered in it - culture. Therefore the proverb says, *All of our science put together is no more than a nit on Appu's skull.*

Hashi, the sixth wise man, stole barleycorn, stole the virginity of the earth priestess and stole fire from the heart of the flint mountain. He ground the flints together; he kneaded the priestess; he baked the earth. This is how Hashi invented bread. In one hour, say the ancient texts, Hashi stole poverty from the rich and foolishness from the wise. Therefore the proverb says, *Is Hashi here? – Mind your pockets! All of our wealth put together is less than Hashi's poverty.*

Goma the Blind, the eleventh wise man, was the first to discover language. He slapped his belly, which made a dull sound, but in vain. *Bread!* yelled Goma until people learnt the secret of sign and signified. That's how, say the ancient texts, Goma pointed without a finger and saw without eyes. In one word Goma saved man from time and place and made the will grow wings. Therefore the proverb says, *All of our texts put together are as the eyes of Goma.*

Nano, the one-hundred-and-eighth wise man, looked around and saw nothing. He listened and heard nothing. He touched and felt nothing. With Nano, say the ancient texts, redemption came to the world.

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This rather pessimistic view of human civilization came to me in a moment of deep frustration with the oppressive turn most of our achievements as sentient beings seem to have taken. At times I've been pondering why every human achievement seems to have an air of ambiguity about it: ownership, language, civilization have all been gained for a price. It seems we've never learnt how to use these gifts and keep our integrity and harmony intact; and we've never found the way to use them for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

To start with, let's state the obvious: we're all human—we have at least that much in common. We're all endowed with the powers of thought and feeling, creativity, imagination, and the senses of freedom and beauty. The powers we have are built-in, not achieved. However, in this shared world we each strive to fulfill our potential within the framework of human society. You and I, our families, our neighbours and our nations all share this planet and the human civilization that took root in it. This globe is a treasure house of potential riches and fulfilments.

As a species our treasures and resources can be categorized as physical and mental: on the one hand, land, water, energy, food resources and travelling routes, and on the other hand science and technology, culture and religion. However we differ, we share the *need* for all these in order to survive as human beings.

Sharing what we hold in common sounds like an obvious goal of humanity, a cause we all would strive to achieve and protect. We want more freedom, more material and spiritual gains, and more meaning in our lives. Practically speaking it's quite clear we need to find ways to do this; so why after millennia of human civilization do we still need to fly to a Greek island and discuss this essential basic strategy?

To say the least, human history is a far from pleasing testimony to such sharing. In fact, on every scale one may observe political history as one long chain of actions with which individuals and groups have been trying with varying degrees of success to suppress other individuals and groups. As a species, exploitation and enslavement seem to have been our main goal for centuries, and even now globalization and the capitalistic survival of the fittest seem to be doing the same old thing through economical strategies and infrastructures. Socio-political structures, from families to empires, seem to have worked along the same lines for ages: power rather than reason seems to have ruled history.

However, if this is the case, our very discussion may seem to be wasting precious time when one could rather be working on protecting oneself and getting hold of as many resources as possible at the expense of others. Moreover, if this is our intrinsic natural drive, can we or should we fight it at all? If *Homo sapiens* is not a thinking being but only a rationalizing stimulus-reaction mechanism, why bother? Do we *need* to oppress others in order to be successful? And really, why share

anything at all? Is this world in fact staging “the survival of the fittest?” And if so, how can we envision a free, happy and sharing humanity? In the arena of genes and species, there’s no ethics, only strategy. In that case history is an automatically driven process of power struggles; then human potential for creativity and happiness is limited by genes, and our ideas are but waves in the cosmic soup of “Nature.”

Is freedom possible then? Even freedom of thought? We’ve had many political and social ideologies, revolutions, visions and idealisms; but somehow no ideologies have been wholly successful with that, and most revolutions have themselves necessitated means of oppression, not unlike the forces against whom they fought. To overthrow the French monarch in 1789, or to replace the Russian Tsar in 1917, the revolutionaries had to be far crueler than the oppressors against whom they revolted. All along religions have preached that we must be good to each other, but our successes in that area have been very moderate, whereas religious organizations have worked along the lines of power politics. Something has gone wrong. Our history contains too many offences against the common good, too much mental and physical violence and suffering. These in themselves have brought in their turn whole societies into the vicious circle of alternating aggressor-victim roles that go on for generations. If we haven’t achieved enough in this field so far, there may be something wrong in our reasoning about this question, something we each do individually, and something that operates us like a hypnotic commandment or a mental implant to prevent us from enjoying our life as individuals and from sharing these Commons successfully and happily. Both problem and hope seem to lie in the human mind. Politics and technology would argue that you need free education to have freedom of thought, but it seems only a *truly* free thought can conceive a vision of a *free* enough education to foster freedom. It’s not

the lack of technology to create riches and prosperity that is to blame, but seemingly the lack of a mental and ethical technology to make us use our potential this way.

It’s hard to argue with the fact that every human tries his best to obey the basic and inherent commandment: *thou shalt survive*. It’s our very reasoning about this objective that is at the basis of human drama.

Nevertheless, we do know there is some logic to be understood about this natural commandment, and some intrinsic limitation to carrying it out. No one sane fights everybody. Even in the darkest examples of human behaviour people do form groups for common interests, create laws and restrictions, and try to find ways to live together.

Everybody wants to be successful, working hard at achieving his goals. Individuals and nations do their best to prosper and improve their quality of life. This drive is at the basis of human achievement as well as of human crime. For half a century intellectuals have rightly condemned blind ambition – the sort of ambition that recruits and enslaves man, making him ruthless, servile or hypocritical. Nevertheless, since the sixties this criticism has not drawn a clear line between that hyper-ambition and our natural striving for achievement. These ideas—Hippie, Socialist, or New Age—were born out of social protest and reaction. And as is the way of reactions, they didn’t hesitate to bind together materialism with our whole material culture, or to identify capitalistic ambition with the very ambition to excel in social and economic systems. In the history of ideas such a total criticism of materiality is not a novelty: it was quite common in Hindu and Gnostic beliefs as well as in the early Buddhism and Christianity; and in fact, in any religion that negated to some extent our physical existence. Some have even gone to the extent of claiming that the riches of the world guarantee inner poverty: the rich cannot come to the

kingdom of God. They created a schism between spirit and matter, and placed “inner” and “outer” achievements in contradiction.

The problem with such attitudes has been that they offered a bitter medicine for a bitter malady, but can't serve as a healthy diet for human civilization. They can't undo the physical world, but create whole cultures of hypocrisy and double standards: human ambition for success has been camouflaged or has changed its goals, but due to our very life force, it has persisted. As a group, achievements of safety, prosperity and social harmony support our survival in very basic terms, and no society can survive without them. Moreover, it has never been proved that there's any categorical contradiction between these achievements and those of the spiritual, ethical or artistic kind. Rather, the only probable reason we may give up goals from the first category is the specific case when they're achieved at the expense of those from the second. But I don't mean to say such categorization is truly possible: every achievement is inseparable from the freedoms, rules and goals of the game that make it reachable, and every achievement contains some mental and spiritual value.

It goes without saying that there is a considerable potential for corruption and hypocrisy in social and economic power; but that very potential abides also under the holy poverty of monks, saints and fakirs, whose hypocrisy has fed quite a bit of the satirical literature of both East and West. At the end of the day neither the achievement of any “external” goal, nor abstention from it, decide its value. Goals can be estimated only in relation to the spiritual gain or loss they entail. When we have reservations about the morality or worth of some achievements, it's by comparing them with other possible achievements. If a social or material achievement involves some injustice, giving it up is an expression of our inspiration for other achievements, on the ethical plane:

peace of mind, compassion, integrity or happiness are the achievements gained on that plane.

### 3. *WERE'S THE KEY?*

In spite of my promise above I'm going to quote here; just once, borrowing some words from Menander, the innovator of the New Comedy: “That which is successful is better than any law.” This saying was used, probably ironically, in one of his plays and evokes roars of laughter; but however immoral it may sound, when it's applied universally in the life of individuals and societies it creates a rather clear hierarchy of values and possible achievements. Giving up on an achievement of any kind is always measured against the possibility of gaining another which is either greater for the individual or valuable for more people. I want to argue that the maximal good is that which is successful for both the individual and society: in fact there cannot be a contradiction if we think about family, society and human kind as interconnected, affecting every individual and being affected by him.

In order to make the idea of the maximal good applicable to real everyday situations, I would like to suggest here as a normative basis a rather simple concept of “concentric responsibility.” Responsibility as such is our ability to respond on our own to the existential situations of our lives. Taking responsibility for one's own life seems to be the first step without which one sets himself as a victim, an outcome of other people's actions. However, responsibility isn't possible without the belief of the individual in his own potential to change and form his life.

Denying this potential is the greatest oppressor: denying one's right to responsibility, decision and fulfilling one's vision is the true agent of mental slavery and despair. Denying our right for responsibility and self reliability is therefore no less than

denying human dignity and integrity. Responsibility is the basic ethical action, without which there's no action but only reaction, no vision but only daydreaming.

By a concept of "concentric responsibility" we may perhaps find it easier to decide what the maximal good would be in a given situation. What I mean by this term is claiming responsibility for our different life circles: The first ring of responsibility would start, then, with securing the physical survival of the individual: taking care of one's health and making a living to feed, dress and shelter one's own body. In the second ring responsibility would cover the extensions of the individual: reproduction and creativity. That would mean taking care of one's children as well as being responsible for one's mental and physical creations at large. A third ring would include the maximal good of one's associates and society; a fourth ring would encompass humanity, and a fifth ring—life forms and physical existence as such. The maximal good would mean an action that takes the largest responsibility for more people, or for more rings of responsibility and harms none or the least possible. Widening one's responsibility could be thought of as a goal rather than a fulfilling a set of designated duties.

These rings of responsibility are not hierarchic: one can't ignore his responsibilities for the community or human kind and hope to achieve the maximal good for himself only. Bearing this in mind, it seems we won't go wrong if we say that the maximal good IS that which is successful in terms of survival, but not the survival of the fittest, but the interdependent survival of the maximum life circles possible.

Individual good and the common good are not contradictory, and in fact they are inseparable. For example, can one abuse alcohol or drugs to the extent that he harms his own health and functioning without

harming his family and his society? Or can he pollute the environment, without harming to that extent his children and grandchildren, as well as the whole future civilization and planetary life at large? Therefore acting with responsibly for the maximal good would mean in many cases protecting an individual from himself: yes, pollution may bring you some immediate profit but eventually it will take its toll on you, your children, friends, townspeople etc. The same would apply for nations or governments: you can't exploit other groups, oppress other people or pollute other countries without bearing the consequences. You can make your own group flourish economically for a while, but eventually you or your children will have to deal with the mental damage and hate such actions foster. Moreover, one can't act in such a way without applying the same norms of aggression and oppression in your own group.

In terms of interdependence all that seems rational enough, and yet we fail to apply this simple rule to our individual endeavours and to our social structures. It seems starvation, war, overpopulation and pollution are not the effects of our lack of technology or resources, but of our lack of responsibility.

How, then, can we gain more responsibility? Well, it's free for the taking: simply by choosing to take more and more of it, by enlarging more and more our concern and care to encompass more life circles. Rationally, this could be applied to every action we have to decide upon.

Yet it seems it's difficult for us to act rationally: our center of consciousness, that faculty in us that makes decisions, seems to shift. We have many voices inside ourselves, a whole republic of different approaches, drives, ideas, emotions and aspirations. We seem not to be the same persons in different stages and situations of our lives. On top of it we have acquired additional "personalities," such as of parents, teachers, or leaders, and

they seem to operate from then on in our psyche. In the framework of this “republic of the self” there’s diversity, struggle, power politics, contradicting visions, and a whole psychological management of this plurality. We form inner coalitions, oppositions and dictatorships. It seems our exterior politics start with inner ones. Strife, aggression and oppression as well as peace, harmony and creativity start there and get exteriorized on the stage of our physical and social reality.

If such is the case, it goes without saying that the first place to apply the golden rule of the maximal good would be inside our “republic of the self.” With the same logic of concentric responsibility applied, it’s not enough to talk about better education; we’re first of all in need of self education and of a genuine individual vision of that sort of responsibility. Then of course, one can and should extend this vision to one’s children, society, and human race at large.

At the end of the day it’s the human wish to be good and the potential for responsibility that seem to be the Common key we aspire to achieve: not slavery but freedom—not law but ethics. This key is there for us to open the treasure house of our common riches, the higher commons to which we aspire and to me, what poetry and art strive to enhance: human love, wisdom, imagination, creativity and beauty. All these are riches that are made abundant when shared.

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