

## HUMAN ACTION AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

(Notes of a talk to be delivered at an Australian Frontier Symposium on Saturday, 30th November, 1968)

The aim of this talk is not to tell people how to act but to set forth some reflections on how the world impinges on me in the hope that what is said will be of value to others with their experiences of life.

My own judgment is that life is tragic in the sense that my own deepest desires -- towards human-brotherhood, community, justice, etc. - are often, to a terrifying degree mocked by

- (1) events in the world such as war, gross injustice, and diabolic manifestation such as Nazism;
- (2) by one's own failures as an individual to embody these values in life.

We live, then, in a tragic world. This is a fact. Another fact is that, like it or not, we have to choose. We have to act and our choices and actions do affect others for good or ill. In this sense, we are certainly responsible for some of our actions.

Granted that we live in a tragic world in the above sense and granted we don't give in to despair, nihilism, evasion, etc. what could be a reasonable centre from which to live a human life? One's moral position is, ultimately, a stance towards the whole of existence. A number of stances are possible. The choice of a stance is, to some extent, inescapably private but this is not to say it is arbitrary - such a choice should be preceded by (it is a continuing choice) a serious effort to get at as much matter relevant to making a choice as is possible given one's time and circumstance.

Four sketches are given of contrasting accounts of an appropriate (moral) stance for man in his world. They are those of Aristotle, Kant, Baier and Camus. Other stances are possible. These are presented to illustrate something of the alternatives possible to us.

As 20th Century people living in Australia, we have each to make choices, to choose our life response. Certain facts are relevant to our situation.

Until relatively recently, Australians tended, by and large, to accept their life responses from traditions within the country. Three such traditions were

- (1) Protestant Christianity -- by and large a narrow, fairly duty centred ethic
- (2) Catholic Christianity -- also a fairly narrow, authority based, shallow, natural law, individualistic tinged ethic.
- (3) A pervasive shallow utilitarian/pragmatic view of life.  
(These brief accounts are, in part, a caricature.)

Due to various factors, more and more people find they can no longer accept the life responses handed down via these traditions. We are in a state of intellectual, political, moral and religious flux. In such a situation old rules, patterns, laws, don't command our belief and commitment. What can be done?

One thing that can be done, and I believe must *be* done, is an individual and communal effort to enter deeply into questions like-

- (1) What is the nature of man? What are his (if any) natural gifts, desires, hopes? What does he say he wants/needs etc.
- (2) What is the condition of man? What is his world actually like? What might man and his world become?
- (3) What have we, as a race, and as individuals, to hope for in the world?

It will be as we try and probe deeply into man and his condition that certain possibilities of life response will suggest themselves to us as possible for us at this moment. Our provision-al choice of life response will be conditioned by what we find it in our hearts to hope for, to have faith in etc.

Some remarks on my own life response. I believe the human condition is a tragic one - in some respects like Camus. I believe there are excellences proper to man - in some respects like Aristotle. My total view is rooted in whatever Christian belief it is that I actually have, A critical question for me is this --Can one believe that it is in and through living and accepting human life to the full, including above all living in and through

the profound suffering and at times diabolic evil in the world that mankind individually and collectively and the universe itself will finally achieve its own freedom, perfection and glory?

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Some reading

The Myth of Sisyphus, A. Camus Vintage Book. Paperback (PB)

The Moral Point of View, K. Baier Random House (PB)

The Varieties of Goodness, G. Von Wright Routledge & Kegan Paul  
Ethics, Aristotle Penguin Book (PB)

Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics, P. Ramsey Scottish Journal  
of Theology (PB)

The Rebel, A. Camus Penguin Book (PB)

The Genealogy of Morals, F. Nietzsche Doubleday Anchor  
(PB)

Existentialism and Humanism, J.P. Sartre Methuen, London

The Ethical Foundations of Marxism, E. Kamenka Routledge & Kegan  
Paul

The Human Condition, H. Arendt Doubleday Anchor (PB)

Childhood and Society, E. Erikson Penguin Book (PB)

A Pictorial History of Nazi Germany, E. Leiser Pelican (PE)