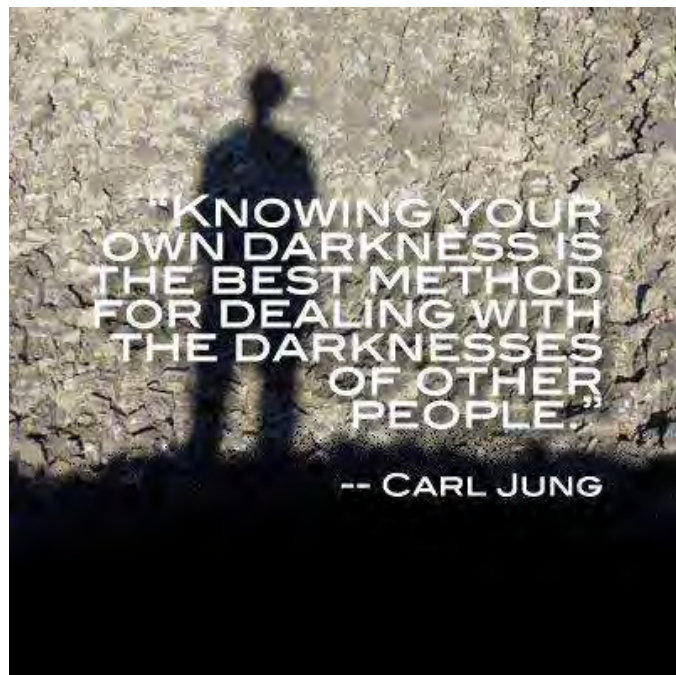


Freedom and the Press, Culture and the Self

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I abhor violence and the latest round of appalling murders committed in France was abhorrent, simply, an inhuman event. Acts like these leave questions such as to what may justify such barbarity because it is not religious at root by any definition. It's fundamentally something else more akin to deep psychological malaise and bad viral influences. I have worked in interfaith and never saw such radicalization within that framework.

Fingers are being pointed, as is the finger pointed back towards the value systems of the West, now lying in something of disarray, if we are to be honest and not just of late. In this instance, the notion of freedom and freedom of the press bubbles loudly to surface consciousness. Freedom has become an unquestioned mantra for quite some time now;

is it considered though? Freedom, for example, might not give sanction to corruption in the public arena, failures in democracy, in cultural malaise or anywhere else we find dichotomy. Are we free to take a paper clip home from work when it is not ours? This last one seems trivial but are we free just to do anything?

I wrote at the end of one article that I wrote on Charlie Hebdo and the freedom of the press: "Of course we have freedom (of the press) but it is predicated to responsibility and maturity. Hate posts, I am afraid to say, fall into the license category not the freedom category. No doubt this type of dynamic mentioned also functions under a principle known as Karma. Sad but true."

I fully understand the intrinsic nature of the press and its value, but does the media serve us well? Is there inaccuracy, agendas, economic pressures, sensationalism and narcissistic penchants displayed on evening news channels? Freedom and the press from the age of the first newspaper printed in Renaissance Venice, is part of Western values deeply embedded into our consciousness now. It's become part of what civilization might mean. It can inform and be a necessary watchdog over the political world, for example, but who watches the media? Mostly, the notion of freedom, as we understand it, started with the Greeks. This was always predicated on democracy because it is the free who participate in democratic principles, notwithstanding the educated, who might understand what they are participating in. This rich mix, there from the beginning, makes for a healthy system in organic terms, which serves to define its nature on a good day.



Aristotle

The educated self was always proposed as an ethical self. At the same time as democracy rose, an ontological and psychological examination of the self was also underway. Much of it is found in the works of Plato and Aristotle, with perhaps the latter becoming predominant in this field, in the Western mind. Within this framework of ethics the terms, 'kalokagathia' or 'kalogenesis,' elegant and emergent universal properties are introduced, which give rise to the ideas of the beautiful, the good, and the true; these properties assumed to reside in nature, become normative values qualifying the nature of the self and therefore the culture of the day. To cut a long story short, the good, the true and the beautiful, paralleled innate functions of the self; the intellect (the true), emotions (the beautiful) and will (striving for goodness). Each property gave rise to their optimum functions and were both cosmological values and found embedded in the nature and architecture of

the psyche; the tripartite self. As these ideas advanced heart was thrown in for good measure. Love as a central virtue was introduced around the same time. None of this is about censorship – its about self.

Patterns like these came to inform the nature of what a gentleman was to the Greeks. It was this gentleman who populated the democratic landscape and not the totalitarian, not the barbarian, nor the abysmally ignorant. This positive template came to define a mature and ethical self given to goodness and ethical conduct, because goodness and ethics were predicated to the beautiful and the good and to the Demos; the people. In simple terms ethics were an elegant proposal worthy of our time and consideration.

Ethics and aesthetics were fused together for this reason and for pragmatic concerns which described the day to day working of the Polis – the Greek version of a new type of city, a new form of government and a working model which sought to optimize such values for all. Character was thus cultivated to suit.

Such persons and virtues were invaluable to the functions of democracy. We see that today, for example when bad banking confounds the economic system to which all belong and where all suffer the consequences. Aristotle's Eudemian Ethics and Plato's Republic and Laws look at such questions. Eudemian Ethics have no exact parallel in the Nichomachean Ethics because those are more akin to an inner growth towards an inculcated personal sense of the good, not an imperative, or law which becomes a must-do situation – a determinism. Even more problematic is, that external laws are often formulated by external people who do not necessarily exhibit the good within themselves, as philosophers and psychologists have noted.

Eudemian Ethics by Aristotle nevertheless, points more to internal growth, the cultivation of character and the metabolization of virtues which might form within the self. This whole idea comes up again in Erich Neumann's work, 'Depth Psychology and the New Ethic,' (1969) where ethics form within the framework of the growth stages of the self, not by authoritarian mandate, thus avoiding any sense of dualisms, or splitting, as psychologists put it. Accordingly, 20th Century thinking here, is framed as the true self or the adaptive self, and is furthermore a relational view of the self where essentially, the self cannot be read as lying separate from an extensive human network to which it belongs from start to finish, including its cultural environment; this is the point. An organic system is a relational system; integral thinking.

Of course ethics and virtues like these are not new, they are just marginalized or forgotten over and over again, and imperative, a force from the outside, often takes the day; but ethics internally, then externally formed by an authentic self, are hugely important. This type of self matters because any culture, any civilization, cannot be built on narcissism or any form of a divided self, it's about belonging authentically to an organic system, where what one does and what one is, is felt by others right through the network. Social thinking is systems thinking. Political thinking is systems thinking also. We tend to affect each other in ways we sometimes don't even realize.

As this stands, a lot of people need protection from all sorts of untoward behaviors.

Getting back to kalokagathia: virtues and the ideal of personal conduct, was and still is about a balanced and harmonious mind and body; an Athenian ideal man or true self who becomes a gentleman in pursuit of excellence. Thought and deeds had to be one.

This person is vitally important as a driver of culture otherwise we risk the slide into anarchy and to levels of a lower order of consciousness which we have already seen in the archaic past and recurrent in our own times.

So what about freedom in the press?

Freedom as first mentioned does not stand alone; it is predicated on kalokagathia, on personal growth, individuation and on responsibility. This kind of maturity is essential in general and to the arts and other cultural expressions. What we bring into existence elevates us or, in the passing, leaves a bad taste in our mouth. Democracy naturally offers human rights. So far, so good, however last year the European parliament, denied an inclusion of spiritual rights into their humanist human rights mandate.

Because of failings like these spiritual groups are persecuted by standing national laws which are used unethically to drive people from belief and from places of worship. One rather mild group under such pressures has already fled Hungary for Copenhagen.

Such things don't appear much in the media but there are "legalized" persecutions and a continuous stream of derogatory articles aimed at belief and aimed at religion. So what does democracy protect?

In the case of the French publication Charlie Hebdo and the cartoons appearing in Denmark and Sweden, they are not posted in fun. These works are frequently a by-product of poor art education for one, then contempt; works given to hostility and even hatred and given permissions by, what is in Europe, a humanist and preferred landscape. Intolerance is inculcated into the system, right down to what is taught and what cannot be taught, in schools and earlier, sucked in with the mother's milk.

The mantra, 'freedom' is therefore often conflated with, 'do what thou wilt, that is the whole of the law.' In this scenario, whatever one thinks becomes justifiable yet not well suited to homogeneity, or even decency in many cases nor to co-existence in a respectful manner. It is a failure to come to terms with how democracy, maturity and the good, might better come into play. Arthur Danto, the late philosopher in aesthetics, opined that the age we live in is actually kalophobic. He meant, all that is fashionable today

holds a fear and avoidance of beauty and virtues. Therefore one could say the good is disavowed and all that is good and lies at the core of the true self, is likewise scorned at everyone's expense.

Indeed, the Greeks understood that virtues and healthy social interactions gave rise to profound personal satisfactions to Eudaimonia as they put it; to joy. To achieve a sense of satisfaction like this, we come back to another Greek term, Arete, the pursuit of excellence of any kind and moral virtues. Ultimately all this was bound up in ideas concerning acts of living up to one's potential. Yet within these proclivities, acts which infuriate others and in knowing something of the consequences to be expected, have nothing to do with Arete or Eudaimonia or the true and innate self, where the task of the cultivation character might best be described as the order of the day – one's own personal journey; where character might build something very different.

Publishing knowingly, and with intention, such salient (infuriating) facts against anyone, a group or a religion, is anathema in this case. There are problems on both sides in this particular landscape of which we speak, which has boiled down to, or is becoming framed as, a free and democratic world versus Islam. Is this the case? The West has been challenged in its ethical stance and the Muslim faith is being challenged on its own ground concerning ownership, or not, of this Islamic underbelly. In the West, presenting provocative acts is not about freedom, because there is little responsibility in it all. As I write, another cartoon has already enraged communities in the Middle East, Pakistan, Indonesia and elsewhere.

There are already violent responses to, what are obviously, irresponsible acts not clothed in real or mature freedoms. Terrorist acts the like of which have become more and more prevalent are frequently laid at the feet of Islam yet is this where they belong?

Hate posts leave me thinking. I am not Charlie Hebdo, but I do grieve over this tragedy. Any in depth, attempt to profile a religion or other group, usually comes up short with problematic analyses, leaving individuals unexplored. A dysfunctional individual fails to address the faithful stance or normative behaviors of a group. Whilst murder was unfolding in Paris, Christian extremists killed several hundred Muslims in January 2015, whilst chanting Bible verses. One could also throw in the Oklahoma City bombing and Anders Breivik in Norway who came out of a Christian mindset ... of sorts. Most people cannot relate to such events as being part of their faith. The failure of such a self is more widespread than one faith or one humanist belief system can contain. Muslim friends and neighbors, locally, display none of these life thwarting penchants or simple disrespect, but come across, time and again, as ethical, considerate and warm-hearted people, profoundly concerned with virtues, family and the lives of others.

Knowingly inciting or fomenting anger within or against the Muslim community is why I am not Charlie Hebdo. Nor would I support any other publication or ideology of a similar ilk, which does the same. Morality and maturity naturally presuppose that we are free but then go on to quietly and confidently affirm such proclivities for we do not always have to shout or brag, then ask circumspectly and from the rootedness of our selves, how do we build bridges to another? How do we build frameworks of dialogue and how do we come to peace, and a sense of common community? Likewise, what kind of culture do we want to be placed before ourselves and our children? Perhaps respect, understanding, love, forgiveness, unification, and the pursuit of excellence, might be the road best travelled.