

A Shakespearean Prologue

The Voice of Cordelian Ethics

In Shakespeare's narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, written when the theatres were closed, at a time as it might be of quarantine and social distancing, the object of Tarquin's lust is not a flute-girl from his own household, the injustice of whose obligations would pass unremarked, but the virtuous, patrician wife of an indiscreet fellow soldier boasting in effect that he has something that Tarquin has not: she belongs to another man, she is Collatine's, *his* exclusive and beautiful treasure, faithful and therefore unavailable, so the object of envy and a challenge to Tarquin's vanity. There is perhaps the thought of the enjoyment of taking someone by force, who will chastely protest but will finally yield. There would also be revenge, for an affront to his vanity, yes, but also for a yet to be spoken and only dimly recognized *criticism* of his way of life that has therefore to be stifled and overwhelmed. And rape is the paradigmatic act that seeks, not necessarily for sexual reasons, to humiliate and have one's power confirmed, to put the woman in her place, possess the female body, *and* silence her voice: unless it speaks in terms of a script you have approved in advance.

The two older daughters of King Lear, Goneril and Regan, know how to speak the approved language; rather than speak truth to power they say what power wants to hear, knowing also, as the loyal Kent does, that 'power to flattery bows', even as they seek to possess it. But Lear in his ascendancy knows how to silence the voices both of Kent and Cordelia, neither of whom are prepared to say what he wants to hear, neither of whom, in fact, *can* utter the words he *requires*. Later he learns that *he* cannot silence the real language of calculation and personal advantage that is liberated in Goneril and Regan by his loss and their acquisition of power.

When we start to reflect philosophically upon ‘morality’ we are all too likely to find a moral language ready to hand but which, for all that, belongs to a conception of moral life which ought really to have been brought into question, along with our own relationship to that language. The salient, received form is that of the language of requirement, permissibility, and prohibition. And the question is, why do we think that this kind of language captures the essence of moral life? Of course we acknowledge promptings of pity or compassion or solidarity, but access to them becomes distorted by the only language of necessity that seems to be available to us, that of the imperative, the voice of command to which obedience is owed, the sort of unwilling willingness encapsulated in Kant’s Imperative. There is nothing here about the love which *finds its natural expression* in the passion for justice, in action done, not for the sake of an abstract justice, but for the sake of the oppressed and the afflicted, for the sake of those who cry out for justice and to whom justice is denied. To put all this another way, the central problem for moral philosophy, which becomes thereby a branch of the philosophy of religion, is our *hardness of heart*, a theme of all three of the Abrahamic religions, though I shall focus particularly on the Buddhist *Karāṇīyametta Sutta*, a sort of hymn to love that explores what fosters it and what stands in its way. Lear is allowed to glimpse the problem through the distorting lens of his abandonment when he arraigns Regan: ‘is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?’¹ On the cusp of his own self-dispossession he fatally divides up his kingdom and finally turns to Cordelia to ask her what she can say to draw a third more opulent than her sisters; she famously answers, ‘Nothing, my lord’: ‘Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth.’ Even if she saw and desired the advantages it might bring, it is something that she *cannot do*. What I suggest is that this Cordelian voice is the authentic ethical voice, *as it is situated* in the world as we still find it. Such a voice is not essentially female – it is human – but given the universal history of patriarchy, the silenced or unregarded voice of the woman remains a resonant symbol of ethical suppression. In the confrontation between Lear and Cordelia, she refuses the expected compliance and he cannot *comprehend* the words she dares to speak. There are many silenced voices – that of the slave, the serf, the colonized, the Dalit – and, as I write, the most poignant and dreadful image of that silencing is the stifled ‘I can’t breathe’ of the African American George Floyd.

¹ Act 3, sc 6.

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But in saying all this I hope to begin to undermine a conception of ethics that unconsciously represents itself as male in order to be heard (represents itself thus also to *itself*), as the voice of and the obedient response to military male authority, the voice of the absolute ruler, what is ordered, commanded, demanded, required – and permitted or allowed. It may use the grammar of power and obedience to subvert that power, but in order to do so it needs to recognize that such is the case. Kant's great Categorical Imperative, which makes arbitrary domination the paradigm issue of morality, is conceived as a self-addressed command, as though Kant could not quite see a sense of freedom beyond the power of obedience to a law one prescribes for oneself rather than one prescribed by arbitrary, more powerful others. He remains implicated in that from which he seeks to free himself, and this needs to be seen and acknowledged. Nevertheless, he accurately portrays a divided psyche in which contrary impulses need to be restrained in the light of a more or less subdued but native concern for the welfare of others; others for the sake of whom actions are carried out, and not, therefore, for the sake of duty. By contrast, the true Cordelian voice is not so implicated, and cannot begin to seem plausible to others who inhabit the ambience of arbitrary power. As Kent takes his leave, banished by the imperious Lear, his parting remark is 'Freedom is hence, and banishment is here'. There is no freedom for the human subject in the ambience and atmosphere of absolute power such as is still exercised by Lear: it is a state of banishment for the 'subject', and this is a remark about the inner life as well as the more obvious outer. One is only allowed a certain language, there is a limit on what *may* be expressed which puts pressure on what *can* be.

When Cordelia takes leave of her sisters, committing her father to their 'professed *bosoms*', Regan replies 'prescribe not us our *duties*', a brilliant, grating grammatical dissonance as an appeal to the *heart* is roughly mistranslated into the language of prescription. The point of this is that such a language of duty stands over against an *alienated*, contrary subjectivity, there to constrain an unruly will, though there is little chance that it will constrain Regan's. But a Cordelian ethics, speaking the language of inner necessity, provides the *very form* of a subjectivity, a formation of the will, rather than a constraint upon it, a direction *of* and not a direction *to* the will. More to the point, she speaks out of a sensibility formed around *pity* which in Shakespeare is a perspective as well as a virtue. When she first sees her father again, asleep in a tent in the French camp, she describes him with the eyes of pity, as an appropriate subject of pity:

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*Had you not been their father, these white flakes
Did challenge pity of them . . .
 . . . mine enemy's dog,
Though he had bit me, should have stood that night
Against my fire.*

In effect, a Cordelian ethics is an ethics of love, and it is love that can hardly make itself heard or must remain silent if it is not to be distorted. Sometimes it dominates consciousness, sometimes it is a helpless bystander within it, sometimes it is overwhelmed. Ironically, Kent is able to act out of love only under cover, but has begun to subvert an imperial notion of duty by invoking its name in seeking to save Lear from himself and aligning himself with Cordelia. He has to go about in disguise in order to deal with Lear, in order to act for the sake of Lear's best interests in secret. Kent acts heroically and with fortitude out of love for Lear, and thus out of inclination, but not as Kant conceives it, and he does not act for the sake of duty, though he uses its language as a front, but for the sake of Lear, indeed for the sake of justice for his shattered king. But as Regan says of her father, 'he hath ever but slenderly known himself' and we witness the inner turmoil that follows the abrupt loss of power as the condition of that power evaporates and he stumbles through madness and grief towards self-knowledge, beginning to comprehend, through suffering, the language of Cordelia he could previously only dismiss with anger.

Introduction

This is an essay in the philosophy of religion – a discipline within Anglophone philosophy that has, for obvious historical reasons, been owned by Christians and ex-Christians, atheist or agnostic, with scant regard for, or attention to, other traditions. I had originally sought to explore ways in which Buddhist practice might be integrated into a *re-conceiving* of the philosophy of religion in terms of spirituality, but an essay is a trial, a testing or ‘proving’, and the one who genuinely *essays* does not know in advance where the path will lead. An Introduction is best written last, and what has emerged in the end is a modest set of proposals about how Buddhism can offer a *non-theistic* contribution to an *intercultural conception* of the philosophy of religion. I have been influenced by the work of the philosopher David E. Cooper, who has written extensively on Buddhism and ‘World Philosophy’, and by that of the theologian Nicholas Lash, who has talked illuminatingly of the religions as ‘schools of wisdom’. I have come to the conclusion that among these ‘schools’ must be included secular humanism, and I want to explore the possibility of such a humanism in conversation with the religious traditions, albeit with a Buddhist inflection; an inflection, that is to say, that offers not just a common language but also a conception of spiritual practice that is both continuous with and augments the ancient idea of philosophy as a way of life.

Over fifty years ago, an Indian philosopher, Daya Krishna, attended a symposium in the West on the philosophy of religion. In an insightful paper, he reflected on his experience, and mildly remarked how skewed the discussions were by an unselfconscious concentration on Christianity.¹ He was drawing attention to a bias that has hardly changed since:

¹ Daya Krishna, 1961 and 1989.

The other great limitation of the discussion ... was its confinement, perhaps naturally, to Christianity alone. It was as if one were to reflect on aesthetic experience and confine one's discussion to Greek art or the Renaissance masters only ... That no one challenged this implicit limitation shows once again the difficulty of getting beyond the perspective of the culture one happens to be born in. (p. 114)

The main work of philosophers of religion would have been on the efficacy of the proofs for the existence of God and on the rationality of belief as these issues were received through the European traditions. They would mostly acknowledge, if nudged, their debt to the Jewish and Arab philosophers, but would return then to focus on the fine detail of the current state of the argument as represented by their contemporaries. The Eastern traditions were largely ignored by philosophers of religion, but also by Western philosophers generally, who would fail to see much 'philosophy' there at all. Things have certainly shifted: there is less likelihood now of Indian philosophy at least being dismissed as it once was as merely 'mystical'.² Nevertheless, it can hardly be said that Eastern sources have been integrated into the philosophy of religion.³ The African traditions languished longer on the Procrustean bed of Western colonial perceptions.⁴ The point about integration, as opposed to assimilation, is that each of the parties to the integration have to *change*, and I seek in what follows to offer a Buddhist voice in the conversations that are starting to take place, between the religious traditions, but also between them and secular humanism.

The demographics have decisively shifted, and there is now a cultural and religious diversity in the West that is yet to be properly addressed or accommodated. Strangely, 'belief' is both stronger and more diverse in its cultural expressions, and non-belief and religious ignorance are also increasingly widespread. I put 'belief' in inverted commas because we almost automatically connect 'religion' with 'religious belief'. But that particular emphasis is peculiar to the Abrahamic traditions,⁵ and what

² Thanks to work by, among others, J. N. Mohanty, Bimal Matilal, Daya Krishna himself, and Jonardon Ganeri; and 'world philosophy' is now being taken seriously thanks to work by David E. Cooper.

³ But see Reinhard May, 1996, on Heidegger's influences.

⁴ See an illuminating paper by Patrice Haynes, 2021.

⁵ In parenthesis, one should note the use of that now commonly used term 'the Abrahamic traditions'. Its introduction corrected a failure to acknowledge Islam, apart from a nod towards the Arab philosophers through whom we received the lost or destroyed ancient traditions and who provided us with a version of the cosmological argument. The routine practice had been to refer to the *Judaeo-Christian traditions*, as though Islam didn't exist or

‘believers’ believed, if we can insert ourselves into these traditions, was both that God would deliver on the promises he made to his people and that his people should trust his word and be faithful to his commandments. Belief in that sense was a particular cultural form of that ‘venture of the spirit’ exemplified in the figure of Abraham ‘going into a place that was not his own, not knowing whither he went’. This was a route into a particular way of life, a moral engagement to which a long line of Prophets felt impelled to recall a ‘faithless’ people. And at least some aspects of that moral engagement provide a point of intersection with other traditions, including those of a non-theistic Buddhism, which never thought in terms of God or that particular conception of a precarious mutual fidelity to a Covenant, where God could be trusted but human beings could not.

Many philosophers will raise their hand in protest at this point and say that we have missed an obvious and vital step, the *first* step, indeed – the question whether we have reason to believe at all that there is a God who makes promises and to whom we should be faithful in the conduct of our lives. In his book on Kant, *The Bounds of Sense*, Sir Peter Strawson had remarked that it was ‘only with moderate enthusiasm’ that a philosopher of the twentieth century turned to philosophical theology, and it is certainly true that although this is an unkind assessment, it has largely been treated, in British universities at least, as a logical nursery for first year undergraduates, learning about quantifier shifts and the forms of valid and invalid argument.

Although – *pace* Strawson and perhaps to his posthumous surprise – philosophical theology remains alive and well in the twenty-first century, with renewed versions of analytic Thomism and Reformed Epistemology, there has been a counter-movement towards the ‘philosophy of spirituality’ which seeks to put questions of belief to one side, in favour of attention to the forms of interiority and their relation to demeanour and conduct; a countermovement well enough aware, perhaps, that those who insist that we need to establish the rationality of belief will consider this, of interest though it may be, merely as a distraction from this essential prior issue, even a slightly dishonest evasion, and will insist, for instance, that a spirituality without religion is a degraded if not incoherent notion.

was at best peripheral to our concerns. However, the expression Judaeo-Christian traditions has now become politically sinister – as an expression of overt hostility towards Muslims, and as something to be safeguarded against, the insidious incursion into our (European) culture by the profound ‘otherness’ of Islam.

Nevertheless, advocates of this countermovement will reply that religious belief is now either ‘unbelievable’ or simply not available, and the philosophy of spirituality is an attempt to assemble what can properly be preserved of a broken or expired belief system. The brutal truth is that this is not evasion or dishonesty but *loss of interest*: a weary sense that these matters have long been settled, that the parties have moved on, along with the imagination, and are no longer listening to each other. But reflection on ‘spirituality’ might also provide the forum for a new culture of listening, away from the old intemperate debates between ‘religionists’ and atheists, ‘new’ and old, irenic dialogue rather than the clash of certitudes, a search for common ground, not in terms of ‘belief’ but at least in terms of the moral possibilities of which such belief was at its best a cultural vehicle.⁶ I say ‘at its best’ because there was also a worst. Nearly a century ago, the writer John Buchan remarked satirically of the divines of the seventeenth-century Scottish Kirk that, ‘Finding little warrant for force in the New Testament (they) had recourse to the Old Testament, where they discovered encouraging precedents in the doings of Elijah and Hezekiah and Josiah’.⁷

The calumny lies not in these particular references but in the Marcionite reduction of the Hebrew Bible to what we too readily think of as ‘the God of the Old Testament’, whereas it is clear that such scriptures are a place of contention between very different *minds*. The Irish Catholic theologian James P. Mackey (2009) trenchantly expresses a similar point, one which is about the prior *sensibility* of the writers:

As any careful reader of what Christians call the New Testament can see, the picture of God painted in the life, death and teaching of the seer Jesus, was tampered with, and it was reduced to their measure and sometimes corrupted, even from the very outset of his public mission, by the closest and most trusted who called themselves ‘sons of the prophets.’ (p. 137)

I draw attention to particular ‘minds’ and ‘sensibilities’ because their formation determines the conditions of moral agency in a time of unprecedented need, a time in which we need clarity about what promotes and what undermines our capacity to act: a clarity, in other words, that has practical consequences. This is one point of a necessary dialogue between the traditions – a well-established dialogue, indeed, but the philosophers

⁶ I have been encouraged and influenced by other recent work, including the book *Religion and Atheism: beyond the Divide* and the internet continuation of the dialogue at <https://religionandatheism-beyondthedivide.com/>.

⁷ Montrose, 1928/2008, p. 29.

lag behind. I have sought to establish a Buddhist inflection, a particular Buddhist voice, in the expectation that, as the conversation proceeds, new and sometimes unexpected voices will make themselves heard. This crux of moral agency – what promotes it, what undermines it – defines the turn towards a philosophy of spirituality, under the influence of the ancient conception of philosophy as it has been received in recent decades through the work of the French philosopher Pierre Hadot, though in my own case it was the work of my Liverpool colleague Stephen R. L. Clark that led me to see the significance of a tradition that grew out of the complex cultural confrontations and engagements of the ancient Mediterranean world. In our own times, postcolonial migrations and other diasporas make possible a similar kind of intellectual engagement between cultural and religious traditions, including now a secular humanism largely, but not exclusively, conceived in specifically post-Christian terms. To use Richard Dawkins' expression, there are not only cultural Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but also Hindus, Buddhists, and others, more or less interior to their traditions, whose contributions will affect the language, the resources, and the self-understanding of secular humanism as it engages with religion in its attempt to achieve clarity about the power of action and what undermines it. I examine the common charge that humanism is essentially hubristic. The best that can be said for my amateurish discussions of Islam and Advaita Vedanta, and my bare reference to Patrice Haynes' work on African philosophy and the idea of an animist humanism, is that it might prompt contributions from those who are better informed. What I attempt myself is to see the necessary integration of the five *indriyas* as a Buddhist or dharmic form of the idea of philosophy as a way of life – the five 'powers' of concentration, mindfulness, energy, 'faith', and wisdom. I also make pivotal use of a central Buddhist distinction between two kinds of 'truth', the one presented as 'ultimate', the other as 'conventional', except that this latter translation strays from the Sanskrit sense of 'concealment' which allows us to make Heideggerian connections with the idea of a concealing framework that prevents us from seeing what nevertheless lies open to view, including the living presence of other human beings and our profound relatedness to the environment. This allows me to use the *Karaniyametta Sutta*, with its famous central image of the love of a mother for her infant, as a model for a concern for justice and the well-being of others, in a way that determines a moral language I want sharply to distinguish from a received language of requirement and prohibition. I make use of a question raised by Stephen Mulhall of the work of Raimond Gaita:

what is the difference between love and God's love? And I use the Sutta to represent a non-theistic version of the vision enshrined at the beginning of *Genesis*. In early chapters, I seek to find some elements of a concern for spiritual practice in Spinoza, Kant, Wittgenstein, and Freud, and I make use of the work of the poets Blake, Rilke, Yeats, Eliot, Hopkins, Ted Hughes, and Shakespeare, on the grounds that they are frequently more conceptually adventurous and closer in their thinking to lived experience than the philosophers.

I have many intellectual debts, most particularly to Anthony Gash and David Cockburn. I also owe a great deal to John Cornwell for his generous encouragement, and to Nicholas Lash for generous and detailed correspondence, as well as to the late James P. Mackey, another theologian from whom I have learned much. I have benefited also from conversations over the years with Jonardon Ganeri and Paul O'Grady. It will be apparent that I am no Buddhist scholar, but my Liverpool colleague Christopher Bartley has done his best to save me from my grosser errors and my culpable ignorance, as have David Burton and my friends Robert Morrison and John Peacock. Philip Goodchild generously waded through an early draft and made perceptive comments and I have benefited from conversations in Edinburgh with him and Mark Wynn, Pauline Phemister, the late Pamela Sue Anderson, and our much-missed Liverpool colleague Gillian Howie; and in Papa Westray with Beverley Clack, Harriet Harris, Jane Macnaughton, and Paul Maharg; and in India with Probal Dasgupta, Mrinal Miri, Sanjay Palshikar, Prabodh Parikh, Syed Sayeed, Jyotirmaya Sharma, Sanil V., and Aparna Vincent.