Searching for an irenic force

Perhaps it's too contrived, or even disingenuous, to announce at the beginning of an essay—in the very title—the pursuit of something, as if the outcome were in doubt, as if every sentence were a step of discovery or a new clue, and the conclusion a triumphant report on success. Surely the searching is done prior to the act of writing—and, if fruitless, yields a retreat from the page for further reflection. Yet it's also true that written words don't merely transcribe our thinking. Often, thoughts are not even glimpses, but only intimations of what might be there to see—a spectral presence, like Michelangelo's *Prigioni*, that writing carves into a thing we can look at. And when a concept is finally put into words it continues to be moulded and polished by use and debate.

Why a force?

In physics, the hypothesis of a gravitational force, which not only accounts for the tendency of objects to fall, but also allows us to make predictions, calculate rates of acceleration and so on, is both causative and measurable. An irenic force, not being a scientific concept, would not seem to be measurable (not in Newtons, of course! —although it will turn out to have its own indices), but it would have to be causative to merit being called a force at all. Now, in propitious circumstances, a gift, for example, when it exerts a peaceful influence can, to the extent that it has a causative input, be said quite trivially to have a force. A gift has an irenic effect in combination with other factors, just as a football match, or a promise, or a threat (of nuclear attack, for example) might have an irenic effect (or the opposite result). Nevertheless, the gift is not a force in its own right, but a component of a bundle of causes that in combination and in the right historical circumstances might tip the balance towards a peaceful outcome.

This essay hopes to do considerably more than describe such a component. It is an attempt to identify a force, in the sense of a regime of causal influence, a vector that can exert an effect of variable strength on its objects—objects we shall eventually have to identify too.

Where shall we look for an irenic force?

It was already there, I felt, in my own work, seeming to spring readily enough from the nature of translation—work that builds in and towards a 'fusion of horizons', cherishing itself both as an activity that needs a space of non-destructiveness to flourish and as a producer of goods (good things) that deserve a future. And since such concerns characterise many, if not all, human activities, it seemed reasonable to trace the putative irenic force to human nature and conceive of it as an innate drive—until I looked more closely at how this would play out, which I'll describe shortly.

In times of war, we yearn for peace; in peacetime, war is a fearsome prowler on the perimeter of our happiness. Almost all of us desire peace—a commonplace that reinforced my thinking that humanity has an innate impulse to peaceful coexistence, thwarted only by our incapacity to agree on the conditions under which it ought to be established. But to recruit the notion of a universal and abiding human nature, which, after all, has done little more than justify outrages and offer sentimental explanations of our foibles, would be a

weak start. For the pre-Socratic Greeks, humans were governed by fate, an external law; for Augustine of Hippo the question of *what* we are is one for God to answer; Pascal thought nature was no more than habit; Sartre states categorically, 'There is no human nature'; Marx: '…all history is but the continuous transformation of human nature.' For Foucault, an essentialist account of human nature is a construct used in the exercise of power. Pragmatists have always fastidiously eschewed the notion. The 'human serpent', as William James describes us, is too slippery a creature to serve our purpose. If humanity has any constant feature, it is incompleteness.

Turning away from human nature and the seductively epic drama of good and evil fighting it out on the battlefield of the soul, I looked at work more closely. The search seems urgent, not to say desperate, in 2023. I'll show you how it went, for this, like all work, is a record.

An innate irenic force: Are we driven or do we drive?

Would it not be a marvellous discovery to identify a primal drive within us that always strove for peace and was frustrated in its fulfilment only by social, political and economic circumstances, by mere contingent facts about the way the world is ordered, such that we needed only to percolate it through our institutions to achieve a state of perpetual harmony, as the Abbé de Saint-Pierre or Kant envisioned? But drives are sightless. As the psychic counterparts of basic biological instincts, inseparable from a primordial 'human nature', they don't take stock of the bountiful world and choose this or that delight. They push blindly from behind. A drive's goals are not specific, but fungible, and in overtaking them the drive looks to extinguish itself, to release itself from itself, as hunger seeks its own extinction. [1] More sophisticated instruments—the senses—are needed to feed back to the organism details of the particular objects to which drives are to be directed: the senses then become the couriers, not of drives, but of desire.

A desire in contradistinction to a drive, is elicited by such objects, which are highly specific. Desire is drawn forward rather than pushing from behind. Desire loves its objects and wants to hold them always in a state of desirableness. It has intentionality and is (albeit often reluctantly) susceptible to reason. What, then, would be the specific object that corresponds to a desire for peace?

In a city bombarded by missiles it might be a desire 'for this to stop'. For us, upon whom no missiles are currently falling, would the desire be for peace in Ukraine, in Myanmar, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or in the townships of Johannesburg—or universal peace? Would it be for a peace imbued with social justice, or a peace brutally overseen by an autocratic regime? And even if the object of desire were a utopian, just and universal peace, could it be an unconditional desire? Suppose it were conditional on sacrificing everything else one most loved? Merely desiring peace doesn't get us very far. A serious, a useful conception of peace is one we carefully construct, a product of deliberation, a ripening of many conversations, not something elicited from us for which we are primed by a drive. The goal of an irenic force would be complex, idealistic, and entrain a profound

[1] This is part of their conceptual DNA. In the drives' earliest incarnation, before Freud parlayed them into his mental topography, the Schillerian *triebe*, or animal drives, were a proto-romantic revolt against the constraints imposed by the universal 'noble ideals' of the Enlightenment.

transformation of the world into a just and harmonious whole, which therefore must a fortiori be structurally complex. No purblind urging could have this as its aim, nor could it engender desire of the kind we require. But desire uncoupled from drive is no more than a propositional attitude: *I desire that P* (where P is a proposition expressing the existence of a state of affairs that satisfies the desire).

So is that what it comes down to? Shall we say no more than that we want peace? How disappointing! This is where we started. Shall we finish here?

There is another route. If not in what we are, then we should pursue our search in what we do, which as I said before is in fact where, in my own thinking about translation work, I began. The object of our desire is a universal peace, which would not be worth striving for if it contained injustice, cruelty, and ignorance. Even to aim for this ideal requires thinking in terms of education, equal opportunity, universal healthcare, adequate housing, addressing climate change, disseminating ideas across cultures through publishing and translation…

What else could achieve this, if not work? But to *say* that our goal would necessarily require work does not imply that work is *in fact* oriented to achieving that goal. Let's find out whether it is or not by looking more closely at what work involves.

The what and the why of work

Every job has its constitutive duties. Someone who supports learners in the acquisition or construction of knowledge and skills is a teacher. A person who bears across to one language what she has understood in another is a translator. Someone who makes furniture out of wood is a joiner. Performing the various duties associated with a job suffices for us to call the duty-performer by the corresponding name. Conversely, a person who claims to be a cellist or a bus driver, cannot be taken seriously unless they have relevant dealings with music or public transport.

There is also a sense in which we speak about the duties of a mother, a father, a pet owner, but in these latter cases the duties are not constitutive: a mother or father who is not dutiful is still a mother or father, no matter how justly we remonstrate with them for their neglect. Likewise (and we should rejoice over this, not lament), there are no constitutive duties for human beings: basic biological features on account of which we attribute neither praise nor blame determine membership of homo sapiens. A momentous corollary of this is that our work entails a set of duties for us, but our choice to undertake that work is free.[2]

Now, a teacher, say, who merely performs her constitutive duties may be mediocre, uninspired, and uninspiring. When we encounter an excellent teacher, whose charisma, intelligence, imagination, and patience can change our lives, we see someone going beyond those minimal duties, the duties by virtue of which she can legitimately be called a teacher. It seems reasonable therefore to see the supererogatory effort by which she encourages,

[2] It's worth remarking here that Heidegger, in the throes of his grotesque dalliance with Nazism in the 1930s, extolled work as service to the state, which implies a subjection of oneself to a duty that has a claim on us as human beings. As if it were one's duty to do one's duty. Eichmann made the same mistake, claiming to be a Kantian, ('I was only doing my duty'), while perverting the Kantian test of what a duty is. We have no duty to do any duty. If we did, human beings would have constitutive duties, whereas we have duties only insofar as we have committed to them.

reassures, or inspires a learner as not belonging to these duties at all, and a natural inference might be that she must be drawing upon human virtues (empathy, imagination, patience, and so on) to augment or supercharge the merely constitutive duties of her role. However, we could equally infer that the human qualities are already there, immanent in the constitutive duties, waiting to be fully, or less than fully expressed: a mediocre teacher being one who fails to express those qualities, while an excellent teacher does.

It's easy enough to resolve this aporia. Consider our hunter-gatherer ancestors. In times of dearth, when scant fish spawned in the river, when deer forsook the plains, when the fruit trees squandered all their energy on blossom, we were hungry and more fiercely competitive. After months of this we grew weary and apathetic, lying around hopelessly, while pregnancy outcomes worsened, infant mortality rose, and our children no longer learned basic survival skills, like hunting, fishing, and identifying edible berries. Then at last good times returned to the depleted tribe, we told stories about that terrible year, and learned the lessons. Around the campfire we lauded education, midwifery, and the curative properties of certain plants; the topics of food storage, animal husbandry and barley cultivation were broached—nor did we discuss these things in desultory fashion. Imagine the fervour of talk upon which our survival depended from one year to another! —and it was indeed *our* survival—as common values became embodied in refined practices and eventually in institutions.

We pour our humanity into work, we set it to work. When we discover the need from which, say, teaching is born, which defines both its *arche* and its *telos,* we see that the human qualities are already there, not mere add-ons to constitutive duties.[3] Why does a history teacher not make up the dates of significant events in her lessons? Is it because her human values proscribe laziness and neglect, or because those vices are inimical to the practice of teaching? If a delivery worker suspected a letter contained a bomb, would they pop it through the letterbox anyway on the grounds that they were merely doing their job? If a translator guessed at the meaning of difficult words instead of looking them up, would we call that a human failing, or a case of poor translation? The supererogatory effort is already inscribed in good work. *What* we do when we excel is inspired by *why* we do it.

So we can answer the question we asked at the end of the last section affirmatively. Oriented from its origins towards the goal of human well-being, work aims and has always aimed at the kind of world we desire. Our supererogatory efforts, which are, at a personal level, no more than our attempts to achieve excellence in what we do, do not, then, so much seek to transcend our constitutive duties as revitalise—we might say, *rehumanise*— them.

Inertia

So far, we have described a schema in terms of the elements that need to be connected: the arche of work with its telos. In re-evaluating the choice whereby we undertook our work of

[3] I use the Greek terms *arche* (origin, source, first principle) and *telos* (end, purpose) to avoid confusion with the origin of our personal choice to engage in the work we do and the sundry purposes our work might have for us. Nevertheless, our personal work choices and goals, I suggest, draw their inspiration and vitality from the arche and telos of work.

architecture, we rediscover the arche of building—its origins in the human need to build. And we've seen that its purpose for us individually points also towards a larger telos: that all humans may have dwelling places, theatres, concert halls, stadiums… and, yes, bus shelters. Turning towards the goal, work brings the irenic force to bear, through us, upon our world. We have identified the axis of this directionality, which is an important step, but all forces have both direction and magnitude, and we have said nothing so far about the latter. How does the irenic force come to be exerted weakly or strongly? Why is there not perpetual peace or perpetual war?

We have partly freed a figure from the stone. But it remains inert. One of Michelangelo's *Prigioni*, Atlas, struggles out of the marble, but is at the same time almost crushed by the weight he holds aloft. How do we effect the Pygmalionesque transformation our captive needs to break completely free, to revitalise the unending task of protecting earth from the menacing sky?

We have already seen that there is a kind of inertia in work. Because for all that work's constitutive duties retain the traces of human values—values that originally sprang from being in and of the world, inspiring the practices needed to survive, and eventually the institutions within which they are now exercised—they may, as I suggested, come to be carried out in a routine and spiritless way. Bored, underappreciated, burdened with a heavy caseload, the doctor may feel her work is drudgery; the architect entrusted with nothing grander than municipal bus shelters may despair of her calling; the joiner, absorbed into a production process that values daily output over quality, may no longer exult in the mind-hand sorcery of transmuting tree into table. Having made the choice, after much deliberation, to practise this profession, she experiences her day-to-day work as a regime of what we might call *bound options*—options that are bound to the choices of others (employers, clients) and ultimately to what I shall call the *inceptive volition* (her own) whereby she became a teacher or an architect in the first place, but from which the original lustre of that choice has fallen. More insidious still than vocational jadedness is an existential despair that asks us: What is the point of building anything, inspiring learners, or restoring people to health in a world like this? Notably in times of anxiety (climate change, recession, nuclear threat), *weltschmerz* can choke the creative life out of the architect-dreamer, weakening the link with the reason we build (both the *why* and the *what for*), and the mediocre, jobsworth doctor may lose touch with the reason for healing.

What is the point? asks the same question as *How shall we reconnect what we do with why we do it?* —a question that can be reformulated again as *How shall we revitalise our work's constitutive duties?* To which I shall offer an answer now.

Error jeopardy and Creative jeopardy[4]

When Clare the joiner decides to make an oak trestle table she forfeits for a time (the time she devotes to that project) all rival choices: the making of a pine bookcase, for example. Her choice, her inceptive volition, to make the table places her under a set of constraints:

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[4] For a fuller treatment of this and related concepts see my lecture 'How to jeopardise a text', given at the University of Exeter in October 2021 (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/364262694_How_to_jeopardise_a_text)

she must use oak, the piece must have a specific structure, dimensions, function, and so on. The work has both an inner logic—a sequential order of operations (sharpening, cutting, planing, sanding, varnishing, and so on)—and a logic imposed by its purpose (correct height for sitting at, adequate width and length for communal dining) according to which some choices are no longer possible, and those that can still be made—bound options—are governed by those same logics. Clare may cut a plank too short, a tenon may be too small for its mortise, the table may rack. Error jeopardy threatens all work in its bound options.

I'm particularly aware of this in my own work. Arriving always late to the text, after all the author's choices have been made, translators submit to the powerful constraints they place upon us. Our own choices, it might seem, barely deserve the name, being bound options tied to the author's inceptive volitions. We have some little space to twitch our linguistic sinews, but we wring from the author's choices no more than the options they bequeath us, and apply the linguistic protocols needed to complete what was begun. We may misunderstand a word, a phrase, a sentence, a passage, an argument; we may introduce ambiguity where none existed in the source text; we may mutilate the author's elegance of phrasing, blunt or deflect the arrows of her wit, flatten the zestful arc of her thinking. As in Clare's case, this error jeopardy is inherent to our craft and we accept it completely. Yet there is a further jeopardy we embrace more ardently.

It's not unnatural to define freedom negatively—one might say apophatically, the way theologians have defined deity—by saying what it is not: unenslaved, untrammelled, uninhibited, unconstrained.... However, let us be aware that these definitions also characterize a vegetative inertia, the freedom of the carrot in the field, a freedom *from*, rather than a freedom *to*. Camus' rebel, unwilling to connive any longer in his own exploitation, is "un homme qui dit non". But the rebel, Camus insists, is also one who says "Yes".

The freedom human beings most value is an active choosing, a willing into existence, a carrying into the world of what we have conceived. Selecting à la carte is not enough: we must rewrite the menu according to our appetite. We want our choice to summon up a new being, aware that freedom is not infinite possibility, not a nebulous thing at all, but has a shape: the limits of freedom are its very contours, allowing it to wheel and flit through the architecture of the given.

To be free is to be subject to self-imposed constraint. When we make choices—be they banal or creative—we extinguish whole galaxies of possibilities. For if I decide to become a concert pianist and practice for six hours a day, I'm almost certainly precluding the chance of becoming a concert bassoonist; and Clare sets aside her idea for a pine bookcase as she begins to plane the oak timber. Freedom excludes possibilities and the grander our choices, the more possibilities it excludes. Sometimes it is an anxious, but often a joyous, forfeiture of choice, whereby in passionately committing we release ourselves from rival bonds. Choice itself constrains. These self-imposed limits are the structures that give our thoughts coherence, direction, cogency: the atrium's pentagonal structure, the subject of a fugue, the rap song's hypotext. Artists and authors impose these constraints upon themselves. So do we all in our life choices.

To discover the full meaning of an author's choices is the epistemological task of the translator before she writes a word. How else can she know the bound options they mandate, the options she must transcend to become the author of her own translation, unless by unconcealing and calling into question the author's inceptive volitions, which cannot themselves be translated, but only critically reimagined, and thus jeopardised again and again? Nowhere is the text in greater jeopardy than in the translator's hands. And this is exactly as it should be. We refuse to guess where an author is going until we know where they are coming from, and so we stand for a while with Keats as he contemplates the Grecian urn, shadow Camus as he walks back down the mountain with Sisyphus, interrogate Kant as to why things-in-themselves are essential to his metaphysics. Creative jeopardy revolts against the mere completion of bound options, despises a horizon of unrevitalized constitutive duties. How else can we own our work?

Two more practical examples. Teaching a class on the French Revolution of 1789 involves an approach, and thus the working out of an inner logic, that is, a set of bound options. But the inceptive volition that gave rise to the teacher's conception of that historical juncture can be challenged by others (including her students) and by the teacher herself. Its causes and consequences can and have been presented in radically different ways: Marxist, liberal, conservative, feminist, and so on. Clare, reviewing the inceptive volition that shaped a table in her imagination, might decide halfway through the job that it was misconceived, that it needs tapered legs or a drawer, or is simply not worth making after all; she will build a cabinet with the oak instead. These challengings and reimaginings are how we rescue our work from inertia, how we revitalise its constitutive duties, calling into question all inceptive volitions, whether others imposed them on us, or we imposed them on ourselves.

Creative jeopardy is essential to problem-solving. No matter how passionately or rationally we commit to a choice, we reserve a degree of provisionality. Perhaps we overlooked the correct choice among the choices we forfeited at the time of our inceptive volition. Without creative jeopardy, we would be condemned to following our bound options wherever they lead: no turning back in the labyrinth when we reach a dead end; no undoing our work so far when we find we have correctly configured four sides of a Rubik cube but cannot complete the puzzle from that position; and having erred in an earlier crossword answer, we could not rectify it, but would have to live with the wrong letters in all intersecting words! Creative jeopardy allows us to retrace our steps, to reimagine the conditions under which success will be possible. It acknowledges that sometimes we cannot have new ideas before we have fashioned an environment in which it will become possible to think them. At an ethical level, it also guarantees that humans have no constitutive duties, being never once and for all free from the activity of choosing.

Creative jeopardy revisits the anxiety of inceptive forfeiture (when we forwent all rival choices) and attempts to summon the inspiration that assuaged and surmounted it. And this is not only a sporadic exercise provoked by crises, but also a constant scrutiny and re-evaluation of our practices that vitalises our work's constitutive duties. Some apply it so vigorously they break new ground in their work; to others it gives a sustaining sense of purpose in their jobs and their lives.

Here, then, is a summary of our enquiry so far and a functional definition: *The irenic force renews by an effort of continual creative jeopardy the connection between the arche of our work and its inherent goal of human amelioration.*

Here we are!

We said earlier that an indispensable effect of the irenic force must be the inauguration of a radically more just and harmonious world. This brings into play so many dimensions of human experience, that its realisation would necessarily be structurally complex and therefore demand a collective effort. But up to now we have seen the revitalising impulse as operating only upon an individual worker, and while it's true that every person has the power to exert an influence on the world (just as each of us has a tiny but measurable gravitational pull on the planet), nevertheless an *aggregate* human effort is not at all the same thing as a *collective* human effort. The question *How shall we revitalise/rehumanise our work's constitutive duties?* arises for collective work's broader project of human amelioration in a different form to how it arises for you or me or Clare. For, parallel to the disenchantment, paralysing anxieties, alienation, acedia, and despair of the worker mentioned earlier, societies have their own disorders, which despite some poignant analogies, cannot be construed as the collective manifestations of individual ones, but must be addressed on their own terms.

How are collective decisions (inceptive volitions) subjected to creative jeopardy? How are they challenged and revitalised? By the engines of debate and contestation we call agonistic politics; by holding authority to account at every level of society; by hypersensitivity to any creeping easement of the separation of powers; by cultural arenas where our critical faculties are sharpened; by a free press, and by satire pricking the balloons of over-inflated power; by thinktanks and the uncensored labour of scholars. To further describe the public levers of creative jeopardy is beyond the scope of this essay and unnecessary to my argument. But I must say this: When I began searching for an irenic force it wasn't my intention to champion liberal democracy, but where else shall we look for these vital mechanisms?

The objects upon which the irenic force operates are each of us individually, societies, cultures, institutions both national and supranational. We commit ourselves, our societies, and our institutions to the renewal of an ancient promise; and being at once the promisors and the promisees, we demand of ourselves that we fulfil it. And the force is, after all, measurable—not in Newtons, but in access to education, decent housing, clean drinking water, legal representation, healthcare; in degrees of political and social inclusivity; in indices of poverty and child welfare; and if Stephen Pinker and others are right, in ebbing rates of violent death and cruel practices.

Hannah Arendt tells us in *The Human Condition* that, for the Romans, 'to be among men' (*inter homines esse*) was a synonym of being alive. But even the hermit who flees society and builds a hut in the wilderness leaves a human record that is ours (we building creatures). Amid a spray of red pigment, 'Here *we* are', says the solitary hand of the Les Combarelles cave artist (to us, we painting creatures). Sisyphus, like Atlas another child of earth subjugated by Olympian authority, has our sympathy—and Camus even persuades us that he's happy—because we too overcome despair and futility by humanising our work.

The more solitary the human presence the more strongly it calls to us in what it does or endures, and the fuller the diapason of our human response: every ‘Here I am’ is also and inescapably a ‘Here we are’.

And yet despite our panoramic interconnectedness, despite our ability to construct a never-ending collaborative sentence, and share our most trifling thoughts instantly with a million strangers, we often fail with tragic results in collective acts of creative jeopardy. The living marble of human synergy is fractured by irreconcilable solidarities, making us stumble into conflict, and even war. Separated by half a kilometre of frozen mud and an ideology, a bassoonist and a joiner, both conscripts, united in the project of human amelioration by their work, bring each other into focus through their telescopic sights. The irenic force is always at work—and it is powerful, but bullets fly notwithstanding the force of gravity, and leaders militarise discourses of solidarity, exalting as sacred duties what are no more than bound options—options it is treason or blasphemy to challenge and jeopardise.

While the futures we may dream for ourselves are precarious, we know at least that through work, we can in some measure steer the course of our transformation. The human record shows us flourishing by creative jeopardy, changing ourselves when we cannot change our environment, developing new forms of engagement with the world and with each other. Deftly wielded, the irenic force gives us the chance to transform what we are by what we do. From sentinel hominins calling down from the trees to asteroid tracking systems, from pigment blown onto a cave wall to digital publishing, work is the budding tips of human phylogenesis.

Joiners, bassoonists, translators, teachers, architects, bus drivers, doctors, authors, anyone who leaves a trace in the human record, as each of us does—we should take infinite pains to ensure that nowhere, at any time, is peace at greater jeopardy than in our hands.

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