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THEY SAID IT

Or if the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a specific and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?

William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," 1891.

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THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS.

Two weeks ago, as the Democratic Party wept itself silly over the passing of the man for whom the term "dry hump" was invented, Bill Whittle made an interesting and astute observation about some of the commentary on the "Liberal Lion's" death. Whittle, an author, blogger, and TV editor, noted that some of the effusive praise for Kennedy's career reminded him very much of an old short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," published in 1974 and written by the science-fiction legend Ursula K. LeGuin. It just so happens that this story is one of our favorites, for reasons that will be obvious by the end of this piece.

"Omelas," which won the 1974 Hugo Award for best science-fiction short story of the year, is the tale of, fittingly enough, the city of Omelas, a utopia filled with laughter, music, love, and, above all, happiness. Everyone in Omelas is happy, joyous, in fact. They are content, absolutely, completely, and undeniably fulfilled. Well, almost everyone, that is.

LeGuin describes a setting far away from the joy and happiness of the rest of the city, far away from the light and the happiness and the love:

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is.

In this cellar room lives a child. “It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect.” The child lives in squalor, scared to death of the mops, nearly starving, and with no contact or support from anyone else in the city. As LeGuin notes, “The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.”

And why is the child there?

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery . . .

There is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms.

Now, the commentary that specifically provoked Whittle to raise the subject of Omelas was written by some person named Melissa Lafsky and published by The Huffington Post web site. Like the rest of liberaldom, Lafsky was taken with Teddy’s purported legacy. She loved the man, apparently, warts and all. And she tried her damndest to put a big pretty bow on the biggest wart of them all. To wit:

We don’t know how much Kennedy was affected by her [Mary Jo Kopechne’s] death, or what she’d have thought about arguably being a catalyst for the most successful Senate career in history. What we don’t know, as always, could fill a Metrodome.

Still, ignorance doesn’t preclude a right to wonder. So it doesn’t automatically make someone (aka, me) a Limbaugh-loving, aerial-wolf-hunting NRA troll for asking what Mary Jo Kopechne would have had to say about Ted’s death, and what she’d have thought of the life and career that are being (rightfully) heralded.

Who knows – maybe she’d feel it was worth it.

You see, Mary Jo Kopechne would have suffered happily – would have given her life, in fact – to ensure that the sweetness and light that was Ted Kennedy was able to be loosed upon the world. Ted couldn’t have done the wonderful things he did, couldn’t have brought so much joy and love and happiness into the world without first leaving Mary Jo to drown, which is to say that only Mary Jo’s sacrifice made it possible; her death was, ultimately worth it. For if she had been brought out of that vile bay, if she were dried and comforted, that would have been a good thing, indeed; but if that were done, in that day and hour all the beauty and delight that Teddy brought would have withered and been destroyed.

So thank you, Mary Jo. We guess.

Whittle continued his discussion of Omelas and of the basic idea of sacrificing one (or a few) in order to indulge the well being of the many, arguing that the health care debate also puts him in mind of LeGuin’s “utopia.” You don’t have to believe the over-heated rhetoric of Sarah Palin and her “death panels,” to know that any proposal that promises to address health care inflation – to “bend the curve downward,” as the President likes to say -- will restrict care, will

“ration” treatment to those deemed least deserving or least “cost effective” by one or many panels of bureaucratic functionaries. Much, if not most of that rationing will involve suffering – physical, mental, and emotional.

But it’s worth it, right? If we can get those 47 million uninsured taken care of, eliminate market functions in underwriting, and get the government in on the game, everyone will be happier. And what’s a little suffering by the weak and enfeebled if we can increase happiness in the aggregate? Right? Heck, the oldsters who get by without getting their hips replaced may even feel it is worth it.

Whether Whittle intended to or not (and he may have, since he’s a very smart guy), what he’s tapped into here is one of the most important and most enduring critiques of the political left, not just on health care or the lionization of degenerates, but on virtually all issues, indeed on its conceptions of morality and government itself.

Name an issue, virtually any issue, and the political left’s approach to it will apply some version of the principle that guided Omelas, at least in theory, the idea that the happiness of the many is immeasurably more important than the suffering of the few or the weak.

Education? Better to endeavor toward equality of outcome than to allow the truly exceptional to consume limited resources. Taxes? Better to take more and more from “the rich,” to punish their success, to “spread the wealth around” in the name of leveling the proverbial playing field. Abortion? Far better to worry about the mother and her needs and the needs of society in general (which certainly doesn’t need another “unwanted” child) than to concern ourselves with the “unfeeling” blob of protoplasm that inhabits her womb.

We could do this all day, but you get the point. The basic idea is that the government can and should be indifferent to the suffering of the few and the enfeebled if it produces an aggregate intensification of happiness.

The left, of course, has always had a serious streak of utilitarianism running through it. Its intellectual heroes include the likes of John Stuart Mill and, more specifically, Jeremy Bentham, whose very definition of “the good” is that which produces the greatest pleasure (or happiness) for the greatest number. Bentham argued, among other things, that government will always favor one group over another and that it operates best when that which it favors produces the greatest collective pleasure.

Those on the left, who wittingly or unwittingly follow in Bentham’s utilitarian footsteps, argue that suffering occurs everywhere and at all times in the absence of government action and that government acts best when it alleviates that suffering to whatever degree is possible. The idea that some may have to suffer at the hands of government so that it may increase the aggregate happiness is acceptable, given that, on the whole, suffering decreases. Those who would urge government inaction are promoting suffering too, the utilitarian left argues, only they are acceding to even greater suffering for more and greater happiness for only a privileged few.

If we go back to the example of health care for a minute, the left, in its honest, unguarded moments, argues that the current health care system is an abomination, because it leaves out so many and permits the suffering, not just of the 40+ million who have no insurance, but those who buy private insurance as well, who pay more for coverage, who can’t get coverage for pre-existing conditions, who are dropped because of illnesses, and so on. A system with government involvement, by contrast, would all but certainly lower the level of care as a general principle and would mean some sacrifices for marginal patients. But because it would cover everyone, it would be incalculably better than the current system and would increase the greater happiness for the greater number. On utilitarian grounds, it is a far sounder, fairer, and more moral system.

It should hardly surprise anyone that the most oft repeated and, perhaps, the most powerful of the arguments in favor of health care reform is this last

one, that it is more “moral.” The modern left, for all its recourse to secularism and its enmity to religion is, nonetheless, first and foremost a “moral” enterprise, as was the utilitarianism from which it draws inspiration.

Bentham argued that “rights” are mere human constructs, the creation of governments, certainly not endowed by our creator, and designed to favor one group over another. “For every right which the law confers on one party,” Bentham wrote, “whether that party be an individual, a subordinate class of individuals, or the public, it thereby imposes on some other party a duty or obligation.” Indeed, Bentham saw the very idea of “natural rights” or “natural law” as “perversions of language.”

The measure of morality, therefore is not an action’s consistency with natural law or the command of a higher authority; it is not an action’s adherence to an ill-defined eternal truth; it is rather the greatest happiness principle. That which produces greater happiness and greater pleasure and decreases aggregate displeasure or suffering is that which is moral.

The opposite of utilitarian morality is that which can most easily be described as deontological ethics, the belief that the morality of an action is dependent on the action itself, not on its outcome or its intentions. Deontological ethics is, by any measure, the foundational moral code of Western civilization, running through both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Hellenic and Roman traditions. As Cicero put it, some 2000 years ago:

So let us regard this as settled:
what is morally wrong can never be advantageous, even when it enables you to make some gain that you believe to be to your advantage. The mere act of believing that some wrongful course of action constitutes an advantage is pernicious.

It is no coincidence, that, in general, those who adhere to deontological morality contrast with the utilitarians as well in their conception of natural rights and natural

law. Rights are, as Jefferson put it, endowed by our creator and transcend society, government and human law. Civilization exists to foster and to promote those rights and to ensure that every individual is able to enjoy them as fully as possible. The individual, not the collective, provides the unit of moral calculus.

This moral tradition and its conception of the individual, as we have written countless times, has its roots in the Decalogue and is perhaps best expressed in Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born I consecrated you.”

The tradition reaches its theological apotheosis in Aquinas, who merges the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman tradition. It reaches its philosophical apotheosis in Locke and his construction of the social contract. And it reaches its political apotheosis in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence and in the republic that sprang from it.

In terms of the health care discussion, the calculus here is not whether a “reformed” system would provide greater aggregate happiness, but whether it would impinge on the rights guaranteed to the few, or even the one. To deny the rights of even one individual in the pursuit of the greatest happiness is, by definition, a moral scandal.

To those who argue that inaction is immoral, since it to permits suffering and actually restricts the expansion of collective happiness, the response is that their “reform” is built on far more suspect moral ground, in that it recruits government to determine those who will suffer and those will not. There is a qualitative difference between the general suffering that is the fate of fallen man and the suffering imposed by the coercive hand of government. Government that institutes suffering to promote a vague concept of the “greater good” or the collective happiness not only violates the Lockeian and Jeffersonian conceptions of the social contract (those on which this country was founded) but also violates the moral code that underpins the entirety of Western civilization.

The left and the mainstream media seem incapable of understanding why it is that opponents of health care reform are so upset, so emotionally troubled by what they see as a minor revision to the health insurance regime. What they don't grasp is that this is anything but minor and it involves far greater stakes than merely the survival of health insurance companies.

Many, ourselves included, have argued that bringing government further into the health care picture, giving the government license over anything more than the old-age and indigence safety nets, will irrevocably alter the relationship between the individual and the state. This is true, but it is actually far more critical a change than just that. In the long run, giving government the ability to exercise its coercive power over individuals to promote the well being of the populace at the expense of the unfortunate few alters the moral calculus by which that government reigns. No longer is it a government "instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed," and dedicated to securing the rights of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. It is, rather, a government that is rooted in what is traditionally considered a moral outrage.

There can be little question why Bill Whittle thought of Omelas and of Ursula LeGuin in the aftermath of Ted Kennedy's death and particularly given some of the morally repulsive commentary on Mary Jo Kopechne's role in his story. The connection is obvious.

The connection is less obvious with regard to health care. But it is no less real, legitimate, and serious.

For years, we have been arguing that the political animosity and conflict in this country are defined by a clash of moral systems. This clash most often plays itself out in terms of sexual issues and sexual morality. But that is hardly its only purview. Indeed, virtually every political issue that divides the blues from the reds, the liberals from the conservatives, the Republicans from the Democrats, is one that can be seen as dividing along the moral lines defined by this clash. Including health care.

LeGuin concludes her story thusly:

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or a woman much older falls silent for a day or two, then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman.

Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

As we note below, somewhere between 100,000 and 2,000,000 Americans walked in Washington in the hope of averting a fate suggestive of Omelas's. Good for them. And good for us. For unlike LeGuin's objectors, we would have no idea where to go.

LATE TO THE REVOLUTION.

We were early subscribers to the theory that part of the reason for the equity market's rebound during the summer was the growing realization that the most radical elements within Barack Obama's legislative agenda were in trouble and likely to remain that way. We and others offered various explanations for his failure to deliver on his promises. We addressed this issue most directly five months ago in an article entitled "The Silent Minority." To wit:

Careful readers may have noticed that we are somewhat conflicted when it comes to Barack's great adventure. Some days we feel certain that he is simply not intellectually up to the task of being president of the world's last remaining superpower; that his knowledge of history, economics, sociology, political philosophy, and even human nature is so limited, his association with the denizens of the radical left so long-lived, and his disdain for American exceptionalism so deeply-seated that he is incapable of seeing the world as it is; that he, like Plato's "prisoners," can react only to his narrow understanding of shadows on a wall.

Other times we find ourselves wondering if perhaps he is an evil genius who is driven by his oft-evidenced resentment and antagonism toward American society to pursue some grand, elaborate plan to destroy the traditional foundations upon which it stands.

For the time being at least, we have decided to ignore this conundrum; to proceed with the understanding that these two seemingly contrasting views of him are not mutually exclusive but symbiotic, and to concentrate instead on attempting to discern where all this is leading.

As summer progressed we became ever more convinced that we were correct not to dwell on the Kierkegaardian "either/or" question but to continue to assume that Barack's troubles stem from a combination of both incompetence and a loathing for America's traditional economic system and cultural underpinnings.

But we recently began to realize that something else is involved here, something quite different, something both ironic and, yes, reassuring.

And what is this something, you ask? Well, you see, Barack has spent his entire adult life working his way up through the ranks of America's leftists. He has befriended and has been befriended by some of the movement's most violent murderers and terrorists, its wackiest pseudo-intellectuals and soapbox blowhards, its noisiest, race baiting "reverends," its most famous tacticians in the dark art of "neighborhood organizing," and its menagerie of labor goons and crooked politicians.

And then one morning he awakened to find that he had risen to the top of the heap; that, as the first openly and unabashedly socialist President of the United States, he was the titular head of the whole insane kit and caboodle; that he was in a position to carry on the works of the greatest revolutionary, utopian heroes of the past two centuries, Babeuf, Blanqui, Weitling, Saint-Simon, Feuerbach, LaSalle, Proudhon, Bakunin, Owen, Fourier, Kropotkin, Engels, Marx, Lenin, Berkman, Goldman, Debs, Thomas, and the more recent champions of his youth, the Students for a Democratic Society, the Progressive Labor Party, the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Weathermen, the Black Panthers, and of course, his intellectual mentor, Saul Alinsky. Oh, frabjous day! Calooh! Callay!

What he didn't know then as he serenely and confidently surveyed the scene from his lofty new position, and began to organize his final assault on the world's last bastion of capitalism, was that the great American socialist revolution that he had spent his entire life preparing to lead had already come and gone; that socialism in America had already dug its own grave and climbed in, so to speak; that the government couldn't credibly promise more free goodies because it didn't have the money to honor the trillions of dollars of promises it had already made in the form of Social Security, Medicare, and

other similar obligations and “entitlements;” that he wouldn’t spend his presidency delivering a socialist *coup de grace* against capitalism; that he would instead spend it defending the decaying remnants of America’s long and deadly experiment with the socialist dream, which were financed entirely with borrowed money.

Of course, most of the American people didn’t know it at the time either. But they are beginning to realize it now, as evidenced by the “tea parties” that are being held all over the nation. And while one wouldn’t know it by reading and listening to the mainstream media, these demonstrations of dissatisfaction are not ideologically driven. Or to put this in another way, they reflect practical rather than political concerns.

If this movement were about politics alone, it could theoretically, at least, be countered by a persuasive call to arms on behalf of a party or a greater cause. This is, after all, one of Barack’s great fortes. But it’s not about politics, it’s about money. It’s about individuals from both parties and all political persuasions who, like the investors in Bernie Madoff’s corrupt empire, have recently discovered that their government made promises to them that it can’t keep, serious promises upon which they had built plans for their retirement and future security.

Ironically, most of them probably wouldn’t know today how badly they have been taken by their government if it were not for the clumsy manner in which Barack went about pursuing his battle against capitalism. And for this, we can be thankful for his incompetence and poor understanding of the America’s traditional economic system and cultural underpinnings.

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