

A Review of David Myatt's 'Good, Evil, Honour, and God'

Introduction

Controversial, iconoclastic, and much maligned as David Myatt is, and metaphysical as his philosophy of *pathei-mathos* appears to be, it is my contention that Myatt's 2013 text *Questions of Good, Evil, Honour, and God* {1} can provide some valuable insights regarding - and a new moral perspective in relation to - current events, especially given the comments and dehortations made, for well over a decade, regarding religious extremism and terrorism.

Such comments and dehortations - by government officials, the Media, and others - have intensified following recent attacks on Western interests, and citizens, in Tunisia, France, and elsewhere, with several government officials, and journalists, repeatedly using the word 'evil' to describe both such attacks and the individuals responsible for them, and with the consensus being that governments, police forces, intelligence agencies, other government institutions and even the armed forces, need to "do more - and have more resources - to tackle and counter terrorism and extremism and prevent radicalization," which often means in practice the introduction of more legislation, the arrest and imprisonment of those proven to be or suspected of being "supporters of terrorism", de-radicalization programmes, mass surveillance by intelligence agencies, and supporting or facilitating or directly engaging in military action against "extremists and terrorists" in certain foreign countries.

A Different Perspective

In his Introduction, Myatt asks a rhetorical question:

"Can we as a species change, sans a belief in some reward or the threat of punishment - be such karmic, eschatological, or deriving from something such as a State - or are we fated, under Sun, to squabble and bicker and hate and kill and destroy and exploit this planet and its life until we, a failed species, leave only dead detritic traces of our hubris?"

He then goes on to offer his own answer, or rather provides a perspective which, as described in *Questions of Good, Evil, Honour, and God*, is different and possibly unique, for it is - as he admits in his *Understanding and Rejecting Extremism: A Very Strange Peregrination* - the result of his

"forty years as a practical extremist [and] forty years of practical experience of extremism and of other extremists; a practical experience that began in 1968 and ranged from fascism, and the racism of National-Socialism, to radical Islam and which practical

experience included founding and leading a political organization; producing propaganda, organizing activities and demonstrations, some of which ended in violence; speaking in public and participating in marches, demonstrations, and brawls; formulating extremist ideology; imprisonment for racist and other violence; participating in and recruiting for paramilitary activities; inciting hatred, violence and prejudice; engaging in criminal activities to fund extremist causes; encouraging and supporting terrorism; and so on.

My conclusions regarding extremism resulted from some years of moral, personal, and philosophical questioning and reflexion; a questioning whose genesis was a personal tragedy in 2006, and which questioning led me a few years later to reject all forms of extremism and develop my own weltanschauung - the philosophy of *patheimathos* - based on the virtues of empathy, compassion, and humility."
{2}

Given this experience, and given the erudition evident in his *Questions of Good, Evil, Honour, and God*, his views certainly merit serious consideration.

Thus, in respect of Islam, he writes that

"the problem with jurisprudence, Muslim and Christian, is and was our fallible, human, understanding of the revelation, of the original message; a problem classically understood in Islam by the distinction made by Muslim scholars between *fiqh* - our fallible understanding and attempts at interpretation - and *Shariah*, the divine and perfect guidance given by Allah, based as *fiqh* (classical Islamic jurisprudence) is on the principles of acceptance of diversity (of scholarly opinion), on custom [العادة محكمة], and on reasoned deductions by individuals that are stated to be fallible and thus not immutable. A distinction that allows for reasoned change, accepts the necessity of diverse opinions, the necessity of individual independent scholarly judgement in trials, arbitrations, and determining penalties, and manifests both the non-hierarchical nature of the religion of Islam and the original understanding of the good and the bad.

In modern times, in the Muslim world, this necessary distinction between *fiqh* and *Shariah*, this allowance for reasoned change based on diverse scholarly opinion, and the necessity of individual independent scholarly judgement in trials, arbitrations, and determining penalties, often seems to be overlooked when attempts are made by governments in Muslim lands to introduce 'Shariah law' with the result that inflexible penal codes and immutable penalties are introduced backed by the claim, contrary to *fiqh*, that such governments have a mandate to impose and enforce such dogmatical interpretations as are an inevitable part of such government-

sponsored codified law."

Which presents an informed, a reasoned, view - based on personal experience, and learning - on how to possibly counter the extremism currently evident in groups such as ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah fi al-Iraq wa ash-Sham, commonly but incorrectly referred to as 'Islamic State'. Which informed view is of supporting, in Muslim lands and elsewhere, classical Islamic jurisprudence and thus the independence, the authority, the learning, of the Qadi.

After analysing how Christianity, Islam, and the modern State, and their respective jurisprudence, view and have viewed 'good and evil' - an analysis complete with quotations in Ancient Greek and Arabic and occasionally in Hebrew, together with his own translations - Myatt presents his alternative: what he terms 'the culture of pathei-mathos', which he defines - in several of his writings, such as his *Education And The Culture of Pathei-Mathos* - as

"the accumulated pathei-mathos of individuals, world-wide, over thousands of years, as (i) described in memoirs, aural stories, and historical accounts; as (ii) have inspired particular works of literature or poetry or drama; as (iii) expressed via non-verbal mediums such as music and Art, and as (iv) manifest in more recent times by 'art-forms' such as films and documentaries. The culture of pathei-mathos thus includes not only traditional accounts of, or accounts inspired by, personal pathei-mathos, old and modern - such as the *With The Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* by Eugene Sledge, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and the poetry of people as diverse as Sappho and Sylvia Plath - but also works or art-forms inspired by such pathei-mathos, whether personal or otherwise, and whether factually presented or fictionalized. Hence films such as *Monsieur Lazhar* and *Etz Limon* may poignantly express something about our φύσις as human beings and thus form part of the culture of pathei-mathos."

In a memorable passage in *Questions of Good, Evil, Honour, and God*, Myatt writes that:

"Gandhi, motivated by a desire for communal change and a vision of the future, more recently wrote that civilization, correctly understood, does not mean and does not require cities and centralized government and vast industries - and thus a modern State - but rather means and requires a certain personal moral conduct, a "mastery over our mind and our passions", non-violence, the simplicity of village life, and communities voluntarily cooperating together in pursuit of collective, and personal, development."

For he argues that the culture of pathei-mathos - to which Gandhi made a significant contribution - is an alternative to these two influential but similar

ontologies of (a) The State, and (b) conventional religions such as Christianity and Islam, both "with their powerful entities, their guidance, their punishments and rewards, and the progression of individuals toward some-thing which the powerful entity asserts or promises it can provide."

In effect, Myatt suggests that the answer to religious and political extremism and to terrorism lies not with governments and their laws, their police and armed forces, and their institutions, all of which he describes, in the perspective of our human 'culture of pathei-mathos', as transient. Rather, that it lies in the wisdom evident in that thousands of years old 'culture of pathei-mathos' whose different ontology is:

"the ontology of the illusion of self and of the unity, sans denotatum, of all living beings; of how we - presented as human beings - can and do affect, and have affected, other life including other humans, often in ways we are not aware of; and of how our perception of I and of 'them' (the separation-of-otherness) has often led to us affecting other life in a harmful way, thus causing or contributing to or being the genesis of suffering, for that other life and often for ourselves. The ontology where there is no distinction, in being, between us - the emanations - and what emanates; there is only the appearance of difference due to our use of a causal-only perception and of denotatum."

This necessitates a moral reformation of ourselves as individuals, for:

"there is in this culture of pathei-mathos a particular ethos: the tone of harmony, ἁρμονίη; of a natural balance, or rather of how certain human actions are hubris - ὑβρις - and not only disrupt this needful harmony but also cause or contribute to suffering. Of the importance, and perhaps the primacy, of human love; of how Eris is the child of Polemos and Hubris, and of how a lovelorn Polemos follows Hubris around, never requited. Of how the truths of religions and spiritual ways are, in their genesis, basically simple, always numinous, and most probably the same: guides to living in such a way that we can rediscover the natural balance, appreciate the numinous, and avoid hubris.

All of which lead to an understanding of (i) how good and bad are not 'out there' and cannot be manifest or assumed to be manifest in some form, by some ideation, or in 'them' (the others), without causing or contributing to or being the genesis of suffering, but instead are within us as individuals, a part of our nature, our character, our φύσις, and often divergently expressed; and (ii) of how, in my view at least, personal honour and not a codified law, not a jurisprudence, is the best, the most excellent, way to define and manifest this 'good', with honour understood, as in my philosophy of pathei-mathos, as an instinct for and an adherence to what is fair, dignified, and valourous.

An honourable person is thus someone of manners, fairness, reasoned judgement, and valour; with honour being a means to live, to behave, in order to avoid committing the folly, the error, of ὕβρις; in order try and avoid causing suffering, and in order to rediscover, to acquire, ἁρμονίη, that natural balance that presences the numinous (sans denotatum and sans dogma) and thus reveals what is important about life and about being human.

For, in effect, the truths concerning honour and dishonour, and of our propensity for both honour and dishonour, are the essence of what we can learn from the supra-national, the living, and the thousands of years old, human culture of pathei-mathos."

Importantly, he writes that what he is suggesting is just

"an alternative way that compliments and is respectful of other answers, other choices, and of other ways of dealing with issues such as the suffering that afflicts others, the harm that humans do so often inflict and have for so long inflicted upon others. The personal non-judgemental way, of presumption of innocence and of wu-wei, balanced by, if required, a personal valourous, an honourable, intervention in a personal situation in the immediacy of the moment."

Personal Honour

In practical terms, the reformation that the culture of pathei-mathos suggests is, according to Myatt, simply an acceptance of personal honour, and thus it is:

"for each of us to gently try to carry that necessary harmony, that balance, of δίκη, wordlessly within; to thus restrain ourselves from causing harm while being able, prepared, in the immediacy of the moment, to personally, physically, restrain - prevent - others when we chance upon such harm being done. This, to me, is Life in its wholesome natural fullness - as lived, presenced, by the brief, mortal, consciously aware, emanations we are; mortal emanations capable of restraint, reason, culture, and reforming change; of learning from our pathei-mathos and that of others [...] The answer which is to live in hope - even need - of a personal loyal love; to live with empathy, gentleness, humility, compassion, and yet with strength enough to do what should be done when, within the purvue of our personal space, we meet with one or many causing suffering and harm, no thought then for the fragility of our own mortal life or even for personal consequences beyond the ἁρμονίη we, in such honourable moments, are."

However, Myatt clearly states that he is only offering his "own fallible answer to the question of how to deal with the suffering that blights this world."

Conclusion

What Myatt has thoughtfully and from experience proposed here is an alternative way of living, a new philosophy, deriving from 'the culture of pathei-mathos'. That is, from the wisdom of centuries, and - although Myatt himself has said {3} that he is not expressing anything new "only re-express[ing] what so many others, over millennia, have expressed as result of (i) their own pathei-mathos and/or (ii) their experiences/insights and/or (iii) their particular philosophical musings" - my own view is that it is not only new but also radical.

New, and radical, because at its core - as a way of life, and as what he terms 'the philosophy of pathei-mathos' with its own ontology and epistemology {4} - is the virtue of personal honour, defined by a specific code of personal, ethical, behaviour. A practical virtue which - so far as I know - has not occupied a pre-eminent place in the thought of, or been the foundation of the philosophy of, those who, over centuries, contributed to the culture of pathei-mathos.

When Myatt's *Questions of Good, Evil, Honour, and God* is considered in the context of his writings about his philosophy of pathei-mathos, and recent essays by him such as *Some Conjectures Concerning Our Nexible Physis* and *Extremism, Terrorism, Culture, And Physis: A Question Of Being* {5}, then it is clear that what he is suggesting is that both the problem and the solution lie in us as individuals, in our nature as human beings; and that it is our responsibility as individuals - not, for example, the responsibility of some State - to "do what should be done when, within the purvue of our personal space, we meet with one or many causing suffering and harm." That the solutions proposed and implemented by temporal States, and by political and religious ideologies and their followers, only - in the perspective of centuries and millennia - contribute to suffering because they do not and cannot change en masse (and have not changed, en masse) our nature as human beings. That an acceptance - by us as individuals - of, and a living by us according to, the virtue of personal is such a means to change our nature, and thus to break the cycle of suffering and hubris.

As Myatt wrote in 2014, he believes not only that

"it is the muliebral virtues which evolve us as conscious beings, which presence sustainable millennial change. Virtues such as empathy, compassion, humility, and that loyal shared personal love which humanizes those masculous talking-mammals of the Anthropocene, and which masculous talking-mammals have - thousand year following thousand year - caused so much suffering to, and killed, so many other living beings, human and otherwise," {6}

but also that it is

"the personal virtue of honour, and the cultivation of wu-wei, [which] are - together - a practical, a living, manifestation of our understanding and appreciation of the numinous; of how to live, to behave, as empathy intimates we can or should in order to avoid committing the folly, the error, of ὕβρις, in order not to cause suffering, and in order to re-present, to acquire, ἀρμονίη. For personal honour is essentially a presencing, a grounding, of ψυχή - of Life, of our φύσις - occurring when the insight (the knowing) of a developed empathy inclines us toward a compassion that is, of necessity, balanced by σωφρονεῖν and in accord with δίκη." {7}

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Notes

{1} Myatt's text is available [as of June 2015] from his site as a pdf file - <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/dwm-good-evil-honour-god.pdf>.

It is also included in his book *Religion, Empathy, and Pathei-Mathos*. 2013. ISBN 978-1484097984.

{2} *Understanding and Rejecting Extremism*, 2013.

This text is available [as of June 2015] in pdf format here - <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/dwm-rejecting-extremism-v3.pdf> - and as a printed book, ISBN 978-1484854266.

{3} *The Way Of Pathei-Mathos - A Précis* (2014).

{4} Myatt's philosophy is described in the books, texts, and essays mentioned [as of June 2015] on his site at <https://davidmyatt.wordpress.com/2014/10/07/writings-concerning-the-philosophy-of-pathei-mathos/> with many of the texts and essays freely available there as pdf files.

{5} In *Extremism, Terrorism, Culture, And Physis: A Question Of Being*, Myatt writes:

"The reality - the truth - of our being is that we humans can always find, and have always found - century after century, millennia after millennia - some cause or some ideology or some ideation or some interpretation of some religion or some dogma or some leader to allow us to express, to live, what is solely masculous [...]"

[For] a harsh modern interpretation of a particular religion hallowed what is masculous to the detriment of what is muliebral, making such a basal, such an unbalanced, masculous physis an ideal to be imitated and strived for, and which masculous ideal included the notion of a personal immolation, via kampf and a dishonourable disregard for the innocency of others, as a means to some posited goal. An unbalanced masculous physis also evident in - and idealized by - the ideologies of communism, nazism, and fascism, and in and by the 'puritanical' and inquisitorial interpretations of Christianity centuries before."

He then goes on to suggest - as he also does in some other of his recent writings - that a solution to the problem of extremism (whether religious or political) is to balance, in the individual, the masculous with the muliebral by:

"the development by individuals of empathy and the cultivation of the virtue of personal honour; and, in terms of society, Studia Humanitatis: that is, education to form, to shape, the manners and the character, of individuals by not only acquainting them with such topics as are, and were traditionally, included in that subject, but also of them being educated in such knowledge concerning our physis as our thousands of years old human culture of pathei-mathos has bequeathed to us."

{6} David Myatt: *Some Questions For DWM* (2014, e-text). The text is included in a collection of his essays published under the title *One Vagabond In Exile From The Gods: Some Personal and Metaphysical Musings*, ISBN 978-1502396105.

{7} *The Natural Balance of Honour*, 2012. Available [as of June 2015] at <http://www.davidmyatt.ws/the-natural-balance-of-honour.html>, and which text is an extract from Myatt's *The Way of Pathei-Mathos - A Philosophical Compendiary*.
