A response to Brian Heatley's paper *Paris: Optimism, Pessimism and Realism*

The difficulty which immediately struck me when I first read Brian's paper, having already been signed up as a respondent to it, is that I so wholeheartedly endorse so much of what he has said. In particular, I think his analysis of the COP21 process and its likely outcomes is spot-on: "Too little agreed far too late" – and the whole accompanying parade of self-congratulation which we have seen from so-called 'world leaders' (if only they *would* genuinely lead!) a hugely dangerous exercise in fantasy-optimism. In fact, as he demonstrates from a few simple calculations and extrapolations, the much-trumpeted 'aim' of the Paris agreement to keep global average temperatures to "well below 2^0C above pre-industrial levels" is little better than an open conspiracy of wishful thinking, so blatant indeed that the naked Emperor in the old story seems a paragon of modesty by comparison.

Equally, I find his account of what this will mean for geopolitics as the century unfolds completely realistic. His round-up of differential implications for the Americas, Asia, Africa, Europe and Britain sets out what seems to me a highly probable scenario – and it entails famine and epidemic, resource wars, mass migrations and probably the emergence of some form of armed autarky in those areas which remain both habitable and defensible. That is, it decisively entails the end of 'progress' as we have got used to understanding it.

In a footnote Brian describes his approach to these issues as complementary to that of my own book *After Sustainability*, and I am very happy to agree. I would just add, as a contribution from the analysis presented in that book (and its predecessor *The Sustainability Mirage*), that this is where a commitment to the "sustainable development" paradigm of green thinking has taken us, and can now be seen as having always been *going* to take us. Retrospectively, the impotence to which this paradigm was always doomed as any kind of practical model is surely plain. Constraining immediate needs (or desires) in order to respect future needs, the anticipation, interpretation and measurement of which were all to be carried out under pressure of the immediate needs and desires supposedly to be constrained, could never have offered anything but a toolkit of lead spanners, capable only of bending helplessly when any serious force was applied. No wonder we continue to find the nuts and bolts of unsustainable living so stubbornly unshiftable (various techno-fixes as proposed by Stuart in his response notwithstanding – since techno-fix is only going to be as effective as the

political will behind it, which isn't there). As Brian makes clear, the Paris agreement simply translates the helplessness of that toolkit into the apparatus of UN institutionalism.

But that the green movement – still, I profoundly believe, our best hope – adopted this paradigm of bad faith and self-deception with such eager enthusiasm surely also says something about how very deep the problem runs. Reflecting on that fact, and despite my very large measure of agreement with Brian about what we face as our likely situation (rather than, as he pointedly puts it, the situation we'd like), I find myself after all with certain remarks to offer about what he takes to be our necessary *attitudes* towards all of this.

I think we need to look at this whole climate-change situation as a *tragedy* – a term which doesn't figure anywhere in Brian's paper. It doesn't, I suspect, because his historian's perspective, with its attention to conjunctures of action exemplifying identifiable trends and tendencies serves to occlude the rather different standpoint – the special kind of detached engagement – from which tragedy must be recognised.

By *tragedy* I should emphasise that I don't intend the casual journalistic usage where any and every accident or outrage or stupid criminality with a cost in human life becomes a tragedy, but rather the classical sense of grievous adversity entailed upon an individual, an organisation or (in this case) a global political system by dangerous self-corruptions *inherent in its own characteristic strengths*.

About tragedy so understood there are two key things to say. The first is that a tragic *dénouement* is never *only* a matter of, and for, grief. There is also the release of creative energy accompanying tragic catastrophe (that is, the inevitable breakdown of some lock-in to inevitable self-defeat). That release the poet W.B. Yeats called the laughter of tragic joy[1], and Nietzsche also famously, if much more wordily, theorised it in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Actually neither joy nor Nietzschean exhilaration are, to my mind, quite the right terms here – we are concerned rather with a kind of release into recovery, a sense of regained self-possession firmly grounded in reality however bitter or grievous, about which perhaps all we can finally say is that it is somehow life-enhancing, a bare positive rather than a negative.

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[1] "Irrational streams of blood are staining earth
   …Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy;
   We that look on but laugh in tragic joy" - 'The Gyres', in *Last Poems*

The second point is that the creative release or recovery (the positive whatever we decide to call it) on the one hand, and the grievousness on the other, can't be *weighed against* each other – to suppose otherwise is the delusive cost-benefit mind-set which goes with utilitarianism and the rise to dominance of the idea of material progress. In particular, the creative release can't be seen as somehow compensating for the grievousness. To think in such terms is to be wholly blind to the essence of the tragic. (What, for example, could conceivably *compensate for* the loss of countless millions in sub-Saharan Africa to ultimately-anthropogenic drought, famine and disease? – the very question is a kind of obscenity.) But both grief and release are nevertheless obstinately *there*, and their co-existence has to be looked at steadily, just as (Brian reminds us) those and other predictably evil consequences of our past and present behaviour need to be looked at steadily.

I want to bring these considerations about tragedy to bear on Brian's envisaged future in terms of what he says this future means – our having to give up (at least for the time being, on his account) the ideals of *progress* and *human universalism.* And here I do want to register a serious difference from the line he takes.

Brian seems to me to offer these two ideals as conceptually linked. He says:

> "Progressives [that is, those committed to the future's being always better than the past] are comfortable with universalism. It is after all what motivates our interest in alleviating poverty everywhere, or seeking universal peace and disarmament, or being sympathetic to the needs and aspirations of migrants."

And if human universalism is, as he also says, "still morally right" even as climate change makes it a pragmatically impossible project on which to deliver, then abandoning both universalism and progressivism together as ideals seems like acquiescing in a realism of the morally reprehensible.

But these concepts are only essentially linked if we *misconstrue* human universalism to mean recognition of a universal claim, or (worse) a universal right, to material progress. The human universalism which matters morally is, surely, the recognition that all people are of equal worth in the sight of God or the light of reason – that distinctions, especially political distinctions, based solely on class or race or colour or gender are morally indefensible. But it has been and remains utterly disastrous to think of that equal worth as somehow supporting

an equal entitlement, shared by all the world's 7.5bn going on 9bn people, to a 'developed' lifestyle based on historic Western levels of material expectation. And it is doubly disastrous when that is combined, as in progressivism, with the default assumption that even those historically unprecedented and ecologically-anomalous levels of expectation must always go on rising.

It is that sort of disastrous misconstrual which leads us to think of progressivist aspirations like the Millennium Development Goals – "eradicate extreme poverty and hunger", for example, or "achieve universal primary education" – as morally required of us, and therefore as something which it will be a wholly negative consequence of seriously adverse climate change to be forced to forgo. In fact, however, such goals are in an important sense *corrupt* – because they answer to, and can only be entertained by pandering to, the general hubristic aspiration to 'master our fate': to control, to our own prescription, every aspect of our natural and social environment worldwide. The highly-evolved primate *homo sapiens* is not endowed either cognitively or emotionally with the capacity to do this (its amazing technical facility under various tightly-circumscribed conditions notwithstanding), and our loss of touch with any intuitive knowledge of those limitations constitutes precisely the tragic self-corruption inherent in the whole post-Baconian Enlightenment project of wresting the natural world to the service of human needs.

So the recovery and creative re-grounding, the barely-thinkable positive which goes with the unprecedented grievousness of our situation, might be called recovery of a realistic sense of the human limitations under which any universalism of concern must always operate. Yes, of course we can and should help one another (and often most readily, in relation to the world's poorest, by getting off their backs in economic, trade and geopolitical terms), but we are simply not up to managing the planet and its vastly complex array of interacting living and institutional systems so as (for example) to eliminate extreme poverty and hunger in Africa, and the sooner we re-learn that kind of hard truth the better.

Brian notes appositely that "climate change is simply where the environmental shoe is pinching first". Another way of making what is essentially the same point is to say that it is where the tragic human tendency to over-reach ourselves is pinching first, is first reaching catastrophe in the historically-specific context produced by the scientific, technological and political revolutions of the last three centuries. We are even *lucky* with that – it could have

been (and, of course, it could still be) the nuclear holocaust in which the blinding flash revealing to humanity its own hubristic folly would be the last thing we saw.

That is why I refuse to think of the kind of scenario which Brian has sketched for us as *pessimistic*, in the simple sense of that term where pessimistic is what you have to be if an honest realism stops you being ('progressively') optimistic. Nor is it *defeatist*, another term which often gets brought into play here. Allegations of defeatism tend to suggest that one is copping out, taking the soft option – if one had a bit more moral fibre, one would hang in there. That can sometimes be true. But it can also be the case, as I think it is here, that the really hard thing to is to accept that a paradigm one has been wedded to just isn't working. Refusing that acceptance is *really* being defeated, by the challenge and exposure involved in genuinely new thinking.

No honest appraisal of the global future from here on out could be optimistic, but that doesn't stop it being *hopeful*. Hope and non-optimism are perfectly compatible. (The opposite of hope is despair, life-abandonment, of which fixed-grin willed optimism is actually a specially-insidious form.) The hope in question must be for the retrieval of a habitable sense of human possibility. This would still allow, and we should certainly work for, a chastened, post-tragic and non-hubristic universalism – a concern to alleviate the human distress which we realistically can alleviate wherever it is to be found, while ceasing to fantasise about poverty elimination and universal peace.

We might even think that it would still allow for progress. For surely it is *progress*, in any sensible meaning of that word, to move from a radically deluded estimate of human possibilities back to a resiliently grounded one?

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9.1.16