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Dark Futures: Toward a Philosophical Archaeology of Hope

THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY CARDIFF LECTURE, 2023

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Abstract
Early in World War I, Virginia Woolf wrote these words: 'The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be […]'. It is tempting to assume that darkness simply hides the unknown and the threatening. It is more challenging to think of it as Woolf did: rich with possibility in even the most desperate times.

We live in what many would readily describe as dark times. These times have brought (among much else) a once-in-a-century public health crisis, the continued redemption of toxic white supremacy, declining trust in and support for public institutions, and growing evidence of impending climate devastation. 'Dark Futures' will consider some of the scenes of this devastation and mine them for insights into our predicaments and our prospects.

1. On Dark Times

Six months into World War I, Virginia Woolf wrote these words in her journal: 'The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think'.[1] The future may appear dark when evil seems ascendant and disaster seems imminent. But, and this is Woolf's point, this darkness means that one doesn't, one can't, know with confidence what the future holds. One can't see with clarity where one is headed, whether one's projects will pan out or one's hopes will be dashed. To say this is, importantly, to say that neither the best possibilities nor the worst – neither the triumph over evil nor the arrival of disaster – are foreordained. Success is not assured, but neither is failure.

I think of Woolf's remark now because there are ample reasons to worry that we are hurtling as inexorably toward catastrophe as our predecessors did in the early twentieth century. I began the project that spawned this essay about ten years ago, in the early days of the Black Lives Matter movement. At that point I meant to reflect on t

[1] Virginia Woolf, entry for 18 January 1915 (Woolf, 1977, p. 22; cited in Solnit, 2016, p. 35).

doi:10.1017/S0031819124000032 © The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819124000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the peculiar and distressing need to keep articulating and explaining and defending the idea that black lives matter, generation after generation. The idea was to study certain forms of race-related injustice in the United States – to study their persistence, and the connections between these injustices and injustices elsewhere and of other kinds, and to tease out the meanings of this persistence and these connections for those of us seeking to survive them. It would be a study of dark times, but also of the possibilities that lie hidden in and by the darkness.

Then Donald Trump won the US presidency, and all that came with him came with him. And then police officers murdered George Floyd and killed Tamir Rice and Breonna Taylor (among, always, others). And then some US government officials and their allies, fluent in the languages of white supremacy and white grievance, called for an assault – they called for something that many responsible people regard as an assault, though the assailants understandably tend to deny and downplay this interpretation – on the seat of federal power, power that they meant (for someone) to seize so as to enshrine voter suppression and to do mostly nothing about climate devastation, wealth inequality, a global pandemic, gun violence, and a great many other things. And then a gunman entered Young's Asian Massage in Atlanta and murdered eight people, including co-owner Xiaojie Tan and five other Asian women,.[2]

And then the gloom thickened. All of the world's slow-motion cataclysms of political violence – in Ukraine, Yemen, Sudan, and elsewhere – continued to grind toward their inconclusive conclusions. And then, about two months ago as of this writing, Hamas unleashed a horrific campaign of murder and kidnapping and other assaults against Israeli citizens, in the worst act of violence against a Jewish community since the Holocaust. And then Israel responded to this outrage with a military assault on the Gaza Strip in which truly astounding numbers of innocent Gazan non-combatants have been displaced, wounded, starved, or killed – so many that even the US president, the leader of Israel's most resolute ally in the global community, felt compelled to complain about Israel's 'indiscriminate bombing' in the besieged enclave (Mellen *et al.*, 2023). And then hate crimes spiked in the US against both Jews *and* Muslims, and

[2] The eight victims were Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Delaina Yaun, Paul Andre Michels, Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Yong Ae Yue, and Suncha Kim (BBC, 2021).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819124000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

political and moral discourse around the issues leading to these spikes plummeted in both quality and efficacy (Morales, 2023).

There is of course more to say, more gloom to try to map. There is always more, because the world is a difficult place, because life is difficult, and because one can focus on only so much of the gloom at a time. But gloom is not all there is. Look in the places where people are suffering and you'll see other people trying to alleviate the suffering. This is the beginning of a spiritual lesson of some kind, though that will not be my concern in this essay.

My concern is with something in the neighborhood of the spiritual, but, perhaps, adjacent to it. I am interested in finding a way to interpret the gathering darkness in ways that prepare the way for responsible and productive action. I am interested in gathering resources – not spiritual resources, exactly, but, say, philosophic resources, by which I'll mean aids for psycho-emotional discernment, for hermeneutic edification – for holding this time, this moment, in thought, without inspiring despair or resignation. I want to ask: what might it mean to think of this moment *as* a moment, and to grant the darkness of the moment, without giving in to despair or resignation? Where can we find the grounds for what essayist Rebecca Solnit calls 'hope in dark times'?

I want to ask questions like these and offer, very broadly, two thoughts in response. First: our current darkness can, if we approach it responsibly, prompt us to refuse innocence and recognize humanity. (If these seem like small things, or banal things, I'll note that one blessing of dark times is that they show how much even small things matter.) And second: one way to approach these matters both philosophically and responsibly involves heeding the counsel of people that many philosophers are only now learning to hear – people like Rebecca Solnit, Toni Morrison, Howard Thurman, James Baldwin, and (for people who were trained the way I was) Emmanuel Levinas.

2. The Meaning of Hope and the Limits of Metaphor

The burden of this essay is to conduct a philosophic search for the grounds of hope in dark times. But to say just this much does not yet indicate very much about how the search will go and what tools it will employ. Philosophy is, after all, a remarkably capacious field, especially when one looks beyond the professional academic discipline and considers the broader human enterprise with which it shares a name. A few words are in order, then, about what this

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essay will and will not aspire to, and how it proposes to make good on those aspirations.

2.1 On hope

One way to bring philosophic resources to bear on the question of hope in dark times is to look for definitions and distinctions. Academic philosophy often starts here, with its practitioners serving as what John Locke thought of as under-labourers to thinkers in other fields of inquiry. Our role on this approach is to provide a kind of conceptual quality control, making sure, for example, that physicists know what they mean when they talk about forces, or that art critics know what they mean when they talk about aesthetic value. Many people over a very long time, in a great many traditions of thought and expression (including but not limited to philosophy), have studied hope in just this spirit, and have as a result found themselves asking what hope is, and how, or whether, it differs from simple optimism, faith, or belief.

Another way to study hope philosophically is to consider its role in ethical life and human agency. Studies in this spirit have led to investigators to ask, for example, whether hopefulness is always a virtuous or beneficial posture, or whether it can be damaging in the ways that expressions like 'hope is not a strategy' are meant to capture (Weber, 2018). The questions that animate these studies mark the vast space of overlap between philosophy and other areas of human endeavor, as they link broadly ethical questions to narrower questions in psychology, religion, art, and still other fields.

These approaches raise what one might think of as foundational or threshold questions. It is not unreasonable to think that asking what hope is should in some sense be prior to reflecting on how it works or what to do with it. Nor is it foolish to think that questions about the real value of hopefulness should have pride of place in those reflections. Questions like these – there are others, beyond these two – are of course worth asking. But they are not the only questions.

Pursuing foundational questions here with the care they deserve would mean turning away from the main issues of this essay, and doing so with little likelihood of usefully contributing to the massive literature they've called into being. I propose instead to follow the path that Katie Stockdale lays out in her insightful study, *Hope Under Oppression*. Stockdale explains there that the vernacular, pre-theoretic sense of hope has enough content to justify

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provisionally bracketing the foundational questions. She puts it this way:

> I understand hope, roughly, as a way of seeing or perceiving in a favorable light the possibility that a desired outcome obtains. This understanding of hope is consistent with, or at least similar to, many plausible accounts of the nature of hope in the literature. And although there remains significant room for debate about how to precisely characterize hope (a question very much alive in philosophy today), I for the most part set this debate aside. (Stockdale, 2021, p. 9)

I'll join Stockdale in trusting the common ground on which scholarly debates about hope take place. I'll note, in addition, that this common ground extends to, perhaps begins in, vernacular understandings. We know well enough what we want words like 'hope' to do in a great many ordinary contexts. Our sense of these words is widely shared enough that we can use them to encourage sick relatives, inspire political comrades, and much else besides, all without spiraling into definitional disputes. These shared understandings are broad and stable enough to justify bracketing the thornier definitional questions here and getting on to other things.

Similarly, I'll want to table the suspicion that hope is ultimately disempowering or otherwise antithetical to responsible human agency. This suspicion can take many forms, but it is often rooted, broadly speaking, in the realization that people in dire circumstances might simply hope for change instead of relying on their own powers to effect change. Stockdale's quite broad conception of hope makes it hard to motivate this worry, and in fact makes clear that the disposition or attitude she describes – whether one calls it 'hope' or something else – is probably essential for anyone seeking to act under difficult conditions. My sense is that critics of hope tend to mean something much narrower than what Stockdale has in mind, which allows us to bracket their worries along with the quest for more granular definitions.

2.2 On dark and light

The favorable perception of possibility that Stockdale associates with hope is a vital bulwark against despair during the times that try the soul. I have built this essay around the rhetorical habit of referring to these times as dark, on the theory that this habit is both deeply grooved and productively ambiguous. Darkness has its merits and

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virtues, I've committed myself to saying. But the habit of invoking darkness in contexts like this also has its dangers. These too are worth a bit of discussion.

Speakers of English often use metaphors of light and dark to distinguish good and bad, better and worse, good and evil, progress and decline. This habit exists in other languages, to be sure, but English is the one I know best. It may for all I know be a cultural universal, with defensible roots in evolutionary psychology. But I am less interested in its cultural reach or its evolutionary warrant than in certain of its faux-anthropological overtones.

In a racialized, racializing world, deeply committed to invidious forms of othering and demonization, the idea of darkness can get bound up with worrisome ideas about the ethical import of human difference. This is one factor in the long, storied career of the idea that human civilization went dark between the fall of Rome and the rise of, say, Machiavelli, or Galileo, or Da Vinci. We know better, now, than to relate the story of human civilization – as opposed to the story of Europe's form of civilization, and even then of only some parts of Europe, viewed only from certain angles – in pat chapters bearing labels like 'Dark Ages' and 'Enlightenment'. The dark ages were not uniformly benighted, as students of medieval Islamic, Mesoamerican, African, and Asian civilizations have abundantly demonstrated. And the world's darker peoples, as some twentieth century anti-imperialists were fond of calling them, are not backward children in need of salvation or containment. But the impulse that inspired this story still persists, perhaps most saliently and distressingly for me, in the Manichean racialism that deforms contemporary US politics (and much else).

The persistence of this impulse makes it imperative to acknowledge and to contest the strong attraction between metaphors of light and dark and judgments about human worth. One way to account for the darkness of the current moment is to trace the gathering gloom to the abandonment of traditions and practices that – as advocates for this account might put it – kept chaos at bay by keeping dark people in their place. Now, the argument goes (the US version of it, anyway; there are others), we've traded excellence or freedom or whatever for diversity or inclusion or whatever, and we reap the whirlwind. Which is why we (are supposed to) need a strongman to make America great again. That is not the argument I'll be making here.

The theme of this essay, in a way, is that darkness is not all bad, and this applies as much to people as to times of day and to civilizational epochs. My main point is that dark times are not simply a warrant for

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despair. But the path to that thought runs through a reconsideration of what darkness means, not through a plea for resilience or perseverance in the face of an unalloyed evil that lurks in the shadows. Calling out and contesting Manichean racialism can be a first step toward that reconsideration.

It is not, however, the last step. It is important to press for more clarity on the stakes of invoking darkness in the way Virginia Woolf does. We sometimes speak of things being darkest before the dawn, and, with Martin King and others, we speak of the darkest night most clearly revealing the beauty of the stars. To say things like this is to think of the dark as something to get through on the way to the good, or as a condition for discerning the good. That's something, but I think Woolf means more than this, and that we can use thoughts of dark times to mean more than this.

The American mystic Howard Thurman aims to capture this something more in his book, *The Luminous Darkness*. He uses this expression from Homer to name his essayistic reflection on the midcentury black liberation struggle in the US. Writing in 1965, he calls the book 'a personal reflection on the anatomy of segregation and the grounds of hope', and uses it to explore ways in which the darkness itself, the apparent warrant for despair, is itself a ground of hope.

Thurman may be working here in the tradition of negative theology, which makes the appeal to the darkness a step toward a kind of epistemic humility and self-abnegation that opens the believer to the workings of the divine. I want to bracket the theological dimensions of this thought while embracing Thurman's turn to personal reflection. There is a phenomenological point at issue here, concerning the importance of, as Stanley Cavell often put it, taking experience seriously.

Despair can come from an inability to see a way out of difficult times, like a sighted person trying to navigate in a darkened world. But vision, like all modes of perception, has to be trained. Sighted people tend to see what they're used to seeing, what they've been raised and conditioned and encouraged to see. Sometimes they don't see anything because they don't expect to see anything: their assumptions about the world outrun and then constrain their experience of it, and they might as well be staring into the darkness. This is the beginning of an argument for the arts, which take the materials of ordinary experience and present them anew, in ways that highlight and uproot and, sometimes, retrain our habits of perception and attention.

Ethical experience can fall prey to a similar dynamic. Assumptions can constrain and becloud one's sense of moral possibility, just as

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darkness obscures the objects of visual perception. And refusing these assumptions – about who matters, and what's possible, and what's just, and so on – can reveal hidden ethical possibilities. These possibilities are more likely to reveal themselves if we can excavate and question the assumptions that block our access to them.

3. Shards and Images

How might we uproot the assumptions that limit the capacity to perceive or create paths through the ethical gloom? Thurman's turn to personal reflection and experience begins to answer this question, but his spiritual commitments pull him toward a kind of work that this essay cannot do. I want to draw this thought out in a different direction, toward the work of writers Rebecca Solnit and Toni Morrison.

3.1 To find the pattern or make one

Solnit's work bears on this project because of her achievements as an essayist and her understanding of that writerly vocation.[3] One way to think of the essay is as a literary form suspended between attempting and testing, between a try and a trial (Sullivan, 2014). Solnit draws out that tension in marvelously instructive ways, in passages like this:

> The essayist's job is to gather up the shards or map them where they are, to find the pattern out there or make one with words about the disconnections and mysteries […]. Essays are restless literature, trying to find out how things fit together, how we can think about two things at once, how the personal and the public can inform each other, how intuitive and scholarly knowledge can cook down together […]. (Solnit, 2019, p. 26)

The appeal to restlessness and to gathering scattered shards is instructive for this political moment. Every moment is inchoate, in the sense that, as Kierkegaard famously noted in his journal, we live forwards but understand backwards. But some moments fit more easily into the sense of something *unfolding* than others. Sometimes what happens registers as a continuation, which lets our

[3] What follows is a down payment on a longer study of the essay as a philosophical resource, to be conducted in conversation with, among others, Lukacs (1974) and Adorno (1991).

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settled habits of interpretation and action continue to do their work. But sometimes what happens is a disruption, which frustrates our settled understandings and practices. Facing these disruptions productively requires a kind of creative discernment, a kind of interpretive imagination, to help make sense of the new moment. The essay form – the burden of which, remember, is *to find the pattern or make one, with words about the disconnections and mysteries* – prizes this kind of imagination.

These claims about imagination and interpretation and novelty and the rest can lead, if one is willing or unwary, down various philosophic rabbit holes. They are, at bottom, phenomenological claims, bordering on issues in the philosophy of cognition, perception, attention, time, and action. But they are also commonplaces about experience, with, I hope, enough intuitive plausibility to cover over the rabbit holes. Humans routinely strive to punctuate the flow of time, to carve it into segments that carry distinctive significance. We label and characterize different generations of people (the Greatest Generation; Generations X, Y, and Z; and so on). We break history into named periods (Renaissance, Victorian, post-colonial, and so on). We create and consume periodicals devoted to 'the year in review'. These activities track on a larger scale the basic phenomenological dynamic of turning the buzzing and blooming confusion, as William James put it, of uninterpreted experience into coherent and navigable states of affairs. In social life as in individual experience, the disciplines of thought and interpretation turn chaos into order; they assign meaning to the meaningless.

The difficult times that inspired this essay are dark in part because each new outrage disrupts settled ways of approaching already worrisome social problems. There are ample resources, in scholarship, law, and policy, for study and diagnosis in each of the cases that define this moment. We know what terrorist attacks are, and what electoral shenanigans are, and what police brutality is, and we have ways of responding to them. But when the cases seem epochal and, if not unprecedented, anticipated only by distant and terrifying precedents – when we see the worst attack on Jews since the Holocaust, the clearest threat to the machinery of American democracy since the US Civil War, and the most striking cases of racist violence in the US since the turn of the twentieth century – then piecemeal scholarly diagnosis requires supplementation by something more – that is, by something more creative and intuitive. Solnit's point about the essay inviting the intuitive and the scholarly – I would say the systematic – to 'cook down together' is instructive in this regard.

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Solnit's embrace of the intuitive – I would say, of experience, and imagination, and creative discernment – highlights one of the defining features of the essay form: the mediation of reflection by individual sensibility. The essayist, she says, 'doesn't just want to recount things that happened, but contemplate what they mean, and often what they mean is really about how they fit into the pattern … [that emerges from] what the writer chose to pay attention to' (Solnit, 2019, p. 28). The inward turn to what the writer *chose* may seem self-indulgent, but it does vital ethical work. It involves taking oneself as representative of a way of inhabiting a form of life and registering a moment in that life's unfolding. It involves offering one's fellows one's own sense of the moment's defining patterns, and submitting that sense to the trial of the reader's reactions, and opening oneself to the risks and challenges of self-interrogation.

This inward turn might be the most difficult part of the ethical life. It goes beyond praising and blaming, which come too easily to too many people, to the deeper work of self-evaluation. It requires that we review our actions and reactions, our thoughts and intentions, our desires and aversions, to see what they mean for the way we regard and engage other people. Essay writing models this ethically momentous inward turn and offers it as a helpful counterweight to the abstractions of systematic inquiry.

To be clear: abstractions are useful, and I will of course employ them now and again in what follows. I would, under different circumstances, link these thoughts about the ethical life to abstract labels like 'democratic perfectionism', under the tutelage of people like Ralph Emerson, Stanley Cavell, and Eddie Glaude (Glaude, 2024; Cavell, 1988). But to inhabit a moment is to have an experience, which means, especially in the early days of a time of disruption and discontinuity, that the texture and the gravity of the experience must receive a hearing. This detour through Solnit's sense of the essayist's vocation is a way of suggesting that there is value, in times like this, in doing philosophy in the spirit of the essay, and of declaring that this piece of philosophical writing aims to explore this suggestion.

3.2 Sites, interiority, possibility

One way to give experience a hearing is to examine its silences and omissions. Toni Morrison offers a blueprint for this kind of examination in her important essay, 'The Site of Memory', where she explains her strategy for overcoming one of the striking limitations of the African-American slave narrative. These powerful and iconic

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texts do important work, but they emerged under conditions that led them to make a distressing concession: the writers usually 'made no mention of their interior life'. Fearful of overburdening the potentially but unreliably sympathetic reader, and mindful of nineteenth century mores around, among other things, discussions of sexual violence, '[o]ver and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as "But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate"'. This pattern sets the stage for much of Morrison's work as a writer. 'My job', she says, centers on the question of 'how to rip that veil […].'

Morrison's method for tearing away the veil over the inner life of early black Americans involves 'a kind of literary archaeology', which she describes like this: 'on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply'. She points to one of her early novels as an example and product of this process:

> I began to write my second novel… because of my preoccupation with a picture of a woman and the way in which I heard her name pronounced. Her name was Hannah, and I think she was a friend of my mother's. I don't remember seeing her very much…. But what I remember most is how the women said her name: how they said "Hannah Peace" and smiled to themselves, and there was some secret about her that they knew, which they didn't talk about…. I don't want to know any more about Miss Hannah Peace…. I would like to keep all of my remains and my images intact in their mystery when I begin. Later I will get to the facts. That way I can explore two worlds – the actual and the possible. (Morrison, 1995, pp. 96–97)

In speaking here of images, Morrison is not limiting herself to visual representations. She is interested in emotionally rich and meaning-laden fragments of experience that call out for imaginative exploration and expansion. These can be as simple as 'a dimly recalled figure, the corner of a room, a voice' (*ibid.*, p. 96). But they 'surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written […]' (*ibid.*, p. 95).

Morrison's vision for a literary mode of archaeology helpfully deepens the connection between the work of Solnit's essays and the philosophical challenge of inhabiting dark times. Solnit's shards are like 'the images that float around' Morrison's mother and the other ancestors: they are fragments of a wider world, scattered like pieces

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of ancient pottery at an archaeological site. Like Solnit, Morrison wants to gather up the shards and find or make a pattern that links them; but she describes this work explicitly in terms of possibility, which helpfully links her approach to the philosophical study of the current darkness.

Inspired by Morrison's example, or by my reading of Morrison's work as an extension of the lessons from Thurman and Solnit, I propose to undertake an exercise in philosophical archaeology. Where Morrison's literary archaeology uses the literary imagination to fill in experiential gaps in the historical record, a philosophical archaeology uses reflective social criticism to fill in existential and ethical gaps in contemporary experience. Where Morrison's fiction takes isolated images from memory and imagines the completed world that might have existed around them, this essay will take two isolated images from the distressing present and read them for signs that another world is possible. While Morrison seeks to restore a mode of interiority that has gone missing from the historical record, this essay explores the prospects for a mode of interiority – involving the subjective embrace of possibility that Stockdale calls 'hope' – that too often goes missing in our contemporary catastrophes.

4. The Split-Screen Presidency

A television newscast shows two very different scenes unfolding next to each other. On one side, a beleaguered US president addresses a shocked nation. On the other side, outraged citizens protest, property burns, and chaos looms.

This broadcast and the events it disclosed took place on November 24, 2014. On that date, Barack Obama convened a press conference to address a St. Louis County grand jury's refusal to indict a white police officer named Darren Wilson. Wilson had some months earlier killed a young black man named Michael Brown under controversial circumstances in Ferguson, Missouri. Mr. Obama appealed for calm and condemned violent protest and generally did the kinds of things one expects of a normal president in abnormal times. (What counts as normal will matter soon, both in the world's chronology and in the unfolding of this essay.) He also acknowledged the protesters' concerns, while nevertheless gently suggesting that the concerns might be rooted less in actual social conditions than in individual feelings, and generally justified Garry Wills' claim that

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'omnidirectional placation' was a core element of his political persona (Wills, 2010).

The memory of Barack Obama's split-screen press conference affects me the way Morrison's images affected her: it seems to demand the exploration of underappreciated possibilities. The scene affected other people, in the moment, in a similar way. Many journalists and commentators committed to posterity their sense that this scene was a visual rendering of the contradictions and disappointments of the Obama era. The first black US president was competing for (air)space and (screen)time with the aftermath of yet another instance of race-inflected lethal state violence. Just as President Obama himself seemed to have arrived from central casting, perfectly suited to play the first black president, this moment could have been scripted, edited, and shot by expert Hollywood mythmakers, precisely to communicate what Cornel West announced on CNN the day after the press conference: the end of the age of Obama.[4]

For most of these commentators, the possibilities that the split-screen press conference unearthed were grounds for pessimism. Mr. Obama's ascension had struck many people, in the US and well beyond, as a sign that the arc of history did indeed bend toward justice. A country built on the racist expropriation of land and labor and that had, in the not-too-distant past, used anti-Asian racism to frame and fuel its contributions to two epoch-defining wars, had elected to its highest office a man with a black African father and Asian (half-)siblings. His stunning victory in the presidential election of 2008 encouraged many people to declare that the country had turned its back on racism, that race no longer mattered to US politics and culture, that we could chart a path into the future unencumbered by the baggage of our racial history. Significantly, and to his credit, Mr. Obama was not one of the people who thought this, though he was happy to benefit politically from the confusion of those who did.

Even among those who were tempted by the cruder forms of post-racialism, this triumphalism lost a great deal of its luster in the years between Mr. Obama's election and the November protests in Ferguson.[5] Journalist Wesley Lowery effectively captures the tension between the hopeful anticipation of the Obama years and the grimmer reality:

[4] CNN, 'Interview with Cornel West', (2014); quoted in Savali (2014, par. 2).

[5] Not all post-racialism is crudely triumphalist. See Taylor (2014).

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> From the death of Oscar Grant on New Year's Eve in 2009 after he was shot by a transit officer in Oakland, California, to the death of Trayvon Martin in February 2012 by the gun of neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, the headlines of the Obama years often seemed a yearbook of black death, raising a morbid and depressing quandary for black men and women: Why had the promise and potential of such a transformative presidency not yet reached down to the lives of those who elected him? (Lowery, 2016, p. 15)

Add to this post-post-racial disappointment the disappointment of those who had taken Mr. Obama's election as another stage in the emergence of a post-colonial world. One could be forgiven for thinking that this man, whose Kenyan father had been a British subject and who wrote eloquently about reading Fanon and Malcolm X, might tilt global politics at least a little more in the direction of the global South, or at least rein in the worst impulses of quasi- or -neo-imperialist great-power politics. This thought would collide with the reality of a US commander in chief and chief executive presiding over remote assassinations by drone strike, appearing to make no progress toward closing the legally dubious Caribbean outpost of American power called 'Guantanamo', and appearing to have no impact on steering ethically dubious assertions of territorial privilege like Gaza and Puerto Rico toward more just arrangements.

Ferguson exploded in the midst of this spiraling disappointment like a live grenade. It deepened the burgeoning discontent by adding yet more grounds for pessimism. What seemed at first to be just another page in the 'yearbook of black death' and another protest against police brutality quickly revealed itself to astute observers to be much more. There was a long throughline connecting Michael Brown to historic victims of state-sanctioned racial violence, like the famous case of Emmett Till from the early days of the twentieth century US civil rights movement. But the town of Ferguson had become a tinderbox, awaiting the dropped match, because it represented the convergence of several forces that traditional civil rights activism hardly addressed.

One might describe this convergence in terms of what some scholars refer to as advanced or intersectional marginalization – marginalization that proceeds not simply by appeal to broad categories of identity, but by appeal to 'race combined with other minority statuses – [like] being poor, being a convicted felon, having dark skin color, living in a "bad" neighborhood'.[6] To grasp the meaning of twenty-

[6] Murakawa (2015, p. 806), citing Lerman and Weaver (2014, p. 157).

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first century racial marginality, consider the distance from Emmett Till to Michael Brown. In 1955 Mississippi, all blacks, by and large, were at risk, simply by virtue of their blackness. Now, by contrast, anti-blackness is complicated by heightened intra-racial stratification, as Black elites wield real power while the immiseration of non-elite blacks (and others) proceeds apace. In what Lowery (among others) calls the Age of Ferguson, the advancement of racial democracy goes hand in hand with the reconstitution and reinforcement of racial hierarchies. Black people can lead states that in the recent past would not have let them vote, while those states still routinely allocate social goods – including the negative goods of vulnerability to violence, surveillance by the state, and likelihood of incarceration – in the ways that defined that benighted past.

What did advanced marginalization, or the post-racial persistence of racial hierarchy, look like in the Age of Ferguson, *in Ferguson*? It looked like a majority black town – 67% black in 2013 – sustained as a black town by forces that make no explicit reference to racial barriers in employment, housing, or mobility. It looked like the overwhelmingly white criminal justice apparatus in this town issuing 32,000 arrest warrants for non-violent offenses in 2013, in a city with 21,000 residents. It looked like blacks constituting 67% of the population but 86% of the motorists stopped by police, which matters even more if, as in Ferguson, the stops led to arrest warrants, and then to the fines and fees that constituted the town's second-largest source of revenue (The Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 31). It looked like the man who killed Michael Brown describing him as a thing, a demon, in ways entirely consistent with long-standing narratives of black dehumanization and animalization; like this man's colleagues leaving Brown's body to bake in the sun for four hours, and the resultant protests being met by a military arsenal, unleashed by the town's overwhelmingly white political and police forces on the citizens they're sworn to serve. And it looked, finally, like a black president holding a press conference to appeal for calm while the streets of the black town erupted in flames.

The case for responding to the Ferguson moment with despair doesn't end here, in part for reasons that will emerge in the next section. But this is a distressing start. An instance of police violence – the latest in a long string of such incidents – spawns protests, which in turn prompt an aggressive and militarized state response. The resulting conflict shines a light on a world of systematically racialized disadvantage, stark but not *de jure* segregation, long-standing anti-black animus, similarly long-standing exhaustion at the routine and routinely lethal workings of anti-black animus, *and* a

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relatively new sense of post-racial disappointment. Where, in all of this, are the grounds for hope?

In an essay written shortly after Michael Brown's death, and after the protests that immediately sprang up in the early days of the crisis, Eddie Glaude points toward an answer. In his view, the protests show 'young black folk in solidarity with others, organizing to transform the conditions of living'. This activity 'does not guarantee that we have awakened from the sleepwalking induced by the election of 2008', but it does reveal something important, and enjoins us 'to be faithful to what Ferguson and those powerful young people have revealed [...]' (Glaude, 2014).

There are two insights here. One is that Ferguson revealed dynamics that often evade attention and scrutiny, and in doing so began to disrupt the machinery of racial innocence. The other is that the Ferguson moment derives its meaning not just from suffering and injustice, but also from the flowering of organized campaigns to fight injustice and end suffering.

I borrow the idea of racial innocence from James Baldwin, who identified the form that concerns me here half a century ago in his classic text, *The Fire Next Time*. There, in a letter to his nephew reflecting on the meaning of blackness in an anti-black world, he writes the following: 'this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen [...] that they have destroyed and are destroying [...] lives and do not know it and do not want to know it [...]'. He goes on: 'it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime' (Baldwin, 1962, p. 292).

Baldwin is concerned here with – among other things – what political theorist Lawrie Balfour describes on his behalf as 'willful ignorance' (Balfour, 2000). Ignorance by itself, simply not knowing the depth and the persistence of racial injustice, is not what Baldwin finds impermissible, however unfortunate it may be. What is impermissible, or what is at any rate to some degree ethically worrisome, is the willfulness: the *not wanting* to know, or, better, the rather desperately wanting *not* to know.

One way to measure the distance from the simple epistemic failure of ignorance to the deeper problem of willful ignorance is to invoke philosopher José Medina's notion of 'epistemic numbness'. Medina is concerned with the routine mechanisms by which we produce people who don't know things they should know about their social worlds, things they could know if they paid attention to their surroundings, their fellows, and their shared histories. The problem is not just that, when it comes to race, we tend not to know some

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things. It is that we have been systematically numbed to these things: that we are epistemically insensitive or impervious or oblivious, and hence less likely to register the evidence that would enable us to know. Medina offers many examples of this numbness, including one that bears directly on the discussion here. He points out that Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters were often accused of disturbing the peace. The striking thing is that one aim of the BLM movement is to make clear 'that there was no peace to be disturbed to begin with, that such peace was the dangerous and harmful illusion of a privileged few sheltered from the structural violence under which the black majority of Ferguson, Missouri, live [...]'.[7]

Medina is concerned with the strange insensitivity of some knowers when it comes to race because he shares Baldwin's interest in the ethical and practical depths of racial innocence. For both of them, one of the keys to refusing and condemning racial innocence is establishing a link between the ethical and the epistemic, between doing the right thing and understanding the world correctly. Both see that we are to some degree responsible for what we know, for creating and sustaining conditions under which we and many of our fellows can routinely, proudly, arrogantly, get the world *wrong*, and not know about the depth of the suffering, of the devastation, that our social arrangements have caused and are causing. We don't know, Baldwin says, and we don't want to know; so we build a world that enables us to get away with not knowing.

To the extent that the Ferguson upheavals represent a refusal of Baldwin's racial innocence, they provide some grounds for hope in dark times. The cameras didn't arrive in Ferguson until protestors and police swarmed onto the streets where a young man had lain dead for hours. But once they were there, they revealed a community that was suffering from more than a single, spectacular display of violence. They showed, to anyone interested in knowing, that racial formation works now by producing and reproducing routine, even banal, forms of vulnerability. More than this, they showed the costs of not knowing this, and of not wanting to know it, and of relying on outdated accounts of race-related injustice that cannot capture the complexities of advanced marginalization.

The revelatory and demystifying aspects of the Ferguson moment were possible only because of the subject of Glaude's second insight. Just as the sudden focus on Ferguson revealed social conditions that post-civil rights America had chosen not to know (and the dangers of

[7] José Medina (2017, section 3). Medina here echoes and builds on the rich argument of his book, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2012).

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this choice), it also revealed the hidden labors of the people who had made a different choice, and who were committed to righting the wrongs that made Ferguson (and many places like it) a powder keg. The Ferguson upheavals involved some impromptu protests and violent looting; but they also, and more importantly, involved a great deal of systematic organizing and activism. Some of this activity emerged from connections that were made on the streets of this St. Louis suburb. But much of it grew out of existing political formations, made up of people who had been fighting for change before the cameras arrived, before Michael Brown encountered Darren Wilson. This concerted political activity turned what might have been just a moment of protest into what many people described as a movement. There was considerable debate over the nature and contours of the movement, especially over its relationship to the suddenly thriving Movement for Black Lives network, and over what the movement, if it was a single movement, required of its leaders (and whether it required traditional leaders at all). But there was no denying that a new political force had emerged, built in part on a new recognition of existing political forces and energies and in part on stoking and harnessing new energies.

This, then, is the second occasion for hope in relation to the split-screen press conference. It appears from one angle to repudiate the Obama era's optimism and to signal the bankruptcy of the dream of racial progress. But from another angle it reveals the hidden resources that are available for the struggle for justice. Beneath and beyond the rituals of traditional civil rights activism and the formalities of party politics – neither of which provided the benefits they promised to places like Ferguson – are vibrant structures for organizing and activism. Mainstream news organizations rarely report on these communities and organizations, for reasons that might themselves count as occasions for despair (but that go beyond the scope of this essay to explore). But the Ferguson upheaval brought some of these communities to the attention of the wider world, while escalating their concerns to people who usually had little interest in them – like the President and the Attorney General of the United States.

5. The Other Face of the Other

Yoni Asher was clearly a man in distress. He would make the rounds of the news shows soon after his appearance before the cameras that presented him to me, and he would in these settings appear as composed, as orderly, as he must usually have appeared under normal

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conditions. But these were not normal conditions. It was October 7, 2023, and Asher's wife and children had just been abducted by Hamas, and this is how he looked then.

This was how he looked when he spoke and attempted to do a strangely extraordinary thing: appeal to the humanity of the captors. 'I want to ask of Hamas', he said: 'don't hurt them. Don't hurt little children, don't hurt women. If you want me instead, I'm willing to come'.[8]

I don't know this man, and I have not done and will not do a deeper dive on his politics or his convictions or his voting record or any such thing. What matters here is what he said in a moment when no politics would avail and no vote was available. The most important lives in his life were at risk; there was not yet any plan for a concerted societal response to which he could commit his body and his desperation; he could only wait, and worry, and plead.

No personal appeal was possible. Nearly all he knew of his tormentors was that they wanted something that he, not being a nation-state or the community of nations, was in no position to give. Beyond that, he knew only that they were human, like him, and that an appeal to their shared humanity might be possible.

But what does this appeal look like? Rational arguments about what makes the human often highlight our powers of reason, such as they are, or our capacities for language use or culture-making. Whatever their value in seminar rooms or debate stages, these moves are not likely to bear fruit in life-or-death situations, when the most important lives in our lives are at stake. So what is an appropriate appeal for this situation? How might one register the moral claim and the emotional urgency in a way that will move the hardest heart?

We have all had parents, even if we have them no longer. We have all been children, even if we don't have our own. We know that adults create and raise families and have probably seen examples, even if we refuse or scorn this path ourselves. Most of all, we know that words like 'parent' and 'child' and 'life partner' and 'family' can connote loving relationships, even if those relationships are not like that for us, and even if we think (or think we think) those relationships are cons or arbitrary constructs or are for some other reason destined to disappoint.

We know, in short, that to be human is to be, if only in principle, vulnerable to and available for an appeal like this: *don't hurt babies*.

Mr. Asher was making a bet on the humanity of his tormentors. The nakedness of this gesture, the vulnerability inherent in it, is

[8] GMA Integrated News, 9 October 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819124000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

what draws me to this image. It puts me in mind of perhaps the most famous idea in the work of the great Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, his idea of an ethics, or something like an ethics, grounded in an encounter with the face of the other.

One mark of the famousness of this idea is the fact that people like me, who know very little about Levinas, know about it. We don't, I don't, know *much* about it, so I offer these remarks as a down payment on a future course of study. But the little I know about it seems aimed at capturing something like what Mr. Asher's gesture means to animate. I am encouraged to read it this way because Levinas's words lead one of his commentators, Diane Perpich, to say things like this:

> Realizing our humanity will not be a matter of acceding to lofty dogmas or deifying some mysterious "Other." It will be nothing more or less than recognizing that I am not alone to act, that my actions create the conditions under which the other person perishes or flourishes [...]. What Levinas captures through this term, the singularity of this other but also our undeniable interconnection, demands our attention just as the ethical meaning he goes on to attribute to the relation demands both philosophical reflection and a practical response [...]. (Perpich, 2019, p. 255)

There is something about a confrontation with the irreducible singularity of another person that makes some claim on us. (There may be a story to tell here about mirror neurons, or the evolution of compassion, or a variety of other things, none of which can fit into the space available for it here.) We may not respond to this claim, but the refusal registers as a refusal, which means the claim has registered as a claim, and has done some vital portion of its work. It cannot do the work that each agent has to do to become responsive to such claims. But it can signal the need for the work, and create an occasion for it.

To place a bet on the humanity of his tormentors was all Mr. Asher could do, so his willingness to do this is, in a way, not remarkable. What is remarkable is the rarity of this gesture in that setting. Whatever else one thinks about the roots of the conflict between Israel and Hamas, it is clear that dehumanization has been central to it. The ideologies, practices, and attitudes that we denote with words like 'antisemitism' depend at crucial points on the thought that Jewish people are less than human, or are in any case less deserving of concern and respect and perhaps of life than some other humans. We have and continue to get ample evidence of this dynamic, from pogroms and attacks on synagogues to the resonance

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of the idea of 'vermin' in Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' and in the political oratory of figures like Donald Trump.

In a distressingly parallel development, Israel's most cynical defenders have responded to the ever-present threat of antisemitism in part by hardening their hearts to the humanity of the people their opponents usually claim to represent. One piece of evidence for this claim comes from the US senator who urges the Israeli military to enter Gaza and 'level the place', without regard for the laws of war, such as they are, or for the innocent lives this would cost, or for what it means to imagine an entire region and all its people as morally tainted and irredeemable. Or from the Israeli leader who punctuates a discussion about appropriate response with the announcement that 'we are dealing with human animals'.

These are knotty issues in ethics and policy. I of course do not mean to pretend otherwise. Having waded a little way into these very deep waters, let me pull back and focus only on some very simple things that seem to me to be quite straightforward. The Hamas attacks are indefensible. But that does not make them inexplicable, nor does it mean that there was no way to work peacefully, in advance, toward a world in which such attacks would be less likely. Some response to the attacks is necessary. But response does not require demonizing an entire population. And a response consistent with the values that we associate with notions like democracy and the rule of law requires something more nuanced than reducing a living community to a corpse-strewn wasteland.

Where are the grounds for hope here? I find them in the nakedness of Mr. Asher's gesture, in the rawness of his appeal to something like a common humanity, or a sense of decency. He is of course not the first to make such an appeal, and I don't know whether he and his supporters registered similar appeals from their Palestinian counterparts. But I see in this appeal, and in the increasing traction that appeals like this from all sides are getting, a space to reset the terms of engagement.

I find myself thinking here of a line that Thomas Jefferson used more than once in relation to the problem of slavery. While thinking of the way the politics, economy, and culture of US society was intimately bound up with the forced labor, brutality, and sexual violence of slavery, he wrote the following: 'We have a wolf by the ears and can neither hold him nor safely let him go'.[9] Thinking of Mr. Asher's appeal, and of the similar appeals before that have gone unheard, I

[9] Jefferson to John Holmes (discussing slavery and the Missouri question), April 22, 1820, in Paul Leicester Ford (ed.) (1984, p. 159).

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find myself wanting to reply to Jefferson: you might begin, you might have begun, by declining to speak of wolves and speaking instead of humans, of your fellow humans, and by considering what it might mean to attend to their suffering as you might your own.

6. Conclusion

I've moved swiftly past a great many complicating factors. There are of course the rivers of details buried beneath the images discussed above. With respect to the first image, there are the many intricacies of US racial politics and criminal justice policy, as well as of each specific instance of (what we antiseptically refer to as) police-involved deaths. With respect to the second, there are the patriarchal overtones of Mr. Asher's appeal – don't hurt *women* or children, he said – and the anthropocentric overtones of the response I've assembled from Levinasian and Jeffersonian resources. (Which is to say: wolves may have rights too.)

I plead guilty to all that, and would expect to do better with more time. But in the time allotted to me, I most wanted to press two simple thoughts. First: dark times give us more than the warrant for despair. They alert us to changing conditions and to opportunities. Their obscurity – *tiempos oscuros*, we say in Spanish – hides possibilities, or signals that the possible is still inchoate and is only beginning to take shape. And second: Morrisonian images – like the ones studied above but of course not limited to them – can be the centerpiece of a promising method for working through the darkness.

In a final attempt to communicate the prospects, or the space, for hope in dark times, I'll turn in closing to Thomas Stearns Eliot. I reject a great many of his political conclusions, but eagerly embrace his magisterial insight into the textures of human experience. Inspired in part by his interest in what his contemporaries would have called 'Eastern religions', his *Four Quartets* speak with considerable eloquence to the possibilities inherent in the darkness. He wrote in pertinent part the following:

> I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
> Which shall be the darkness of God. As in a theatre
> The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
> With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness
>
> (Eliot [1941], 2023)

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Change is afoot. The stage settings are being moved, disassembled, withdrawn, assembled, replaced. The darkness is about that too. The question is whether we will inhabit the darkness passively, or reactively, or fearfully, or whether we will join in the work of preparing the stage for a productive next act.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819124000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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