

I didn't ask for this: justice versus illness

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'I didn't ask for this': justice *versus* illness

'I didn't ask for this.' So said my mum suddenly hospitalized with loss of memory and mobility. My response, that no one does, seemed bleak and unhelpful, failing to address the sense of injustice that lay behind the comment. It strikes me now as being in a similar vein to those who mock the idea of people trying to *make sense of* a calamity: 'It doesn't take anything to make sense of a lorry ploughing into a school – it's very simple.' But the mockery, like my response, is almost wilfully obtuse. Calamities shake us in a number of ways, one of the main ones being they threaten our sense of justice; attempts to make sense of them are therefore part of our dialogue about justice.

Justice is a complex notion but calamities seem to violate two criteria. The first is that how we fare in life should largely be a product of our choices and character; the second, that life's benefits and burdens should be shared fairly across society. The term 'should' here is ambiguous. Roughly, though, it means, first, that insofar as life is just these criteria will be met and, second, that insofar as we seek to be just we will seek to create societies and behave individually in ways that meet these criteria.

One way in which we make sense of serious illness is to say it meets the first criterion; serious illness is the product of our behaviour and choices. Perhaps the paradigm is lung cancer that results from smoking. Much public health discussion and policy seems driven by this belief. But, of course, a cursory examination shows the belief often and perhaps usually to be false. The memory and mobility loss suffered by my mum is presumably largely because of a combination of genetic and circumstantial factors inherited in life's lottery. Her sister has similar problems; perhaps I will too. Despite this, I have heard others and even myself seeking to attribute cause or blame: 'She never really looked after herself', 'She used to smoke', and so on. The desire to find justice is strong even in the face of

obvious counter example. We are negotiating a deal with fate: I shall look after myself, I will not smoke, and I will reap the reward, my life will go well, I shall be happy.

But the etymology of the term, happiness, gives fair warning of our situation (McMahon, 2007). Its origins are in the Middle English and Old Norse *Happ* meaning chance or fortune. These origins are shared with terms such as *happens*, *hap-hazard*, *happenstance*, and *perhaps*. Little wonder, then, that our search for happiness should seem *hapless*. Perhaps happiness is a gift rather than a reward. For this reason among others, the term *happiness* is not necessarily a poor translation for the classical Greek *eudaimonia*. An alternative translation is, of course, flourishing (Charles, 1984); but this translation is locked closely to the account of *eudaimonia* given by the Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle. *Happiness* or even 'Someone to watch over me' might capture better its idiomatic use in classical Greece. Greek myths, such as those recounted by Homer, include many stories of good or ill meted out to individuals by capricious and sometimes apparently unjust gods. A similar sense is conveyed in the Old Testament book of Job in which the Judaic god behaves very like an Olympian one, effectively having a bet with the devil about what will happen if he destroys a good man's family and well-being.

But one message from the monotheistic traditions is importantly different from that of classical Greece. This is that the one god is just, although sometimes puzzling, and that the injustice in this world will be righted in the next. In other religious traditions the righting occurs through rebirth. Aristotle and most classical philosophers did not take these routes. One way of reading the ethics of Aristotle, Epicurus and the Stoics is as an attempt to show that the first criterion of justice is true, that how life goes is a product of character and choice; and that the second criterion

follows, that we should choose to be just and to implement justice. If we are just our lives will go well; if not, they will go badly.

How, then, would these philosophers view the calamitous illnesses visited on some without any obvious link to justice or desert? Aristotle's line is different to that of the later Hellenistic tradition. For him, temperance is a virtue in part, at least, because of its link to health (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1119a). Those who are intemperate through overindulgence risk undermining the health required to live well, i.e. as practical reason would dictate. The extent to which the link between lifestyle and health was made by Aristotle is not clear; it seems unlikely that he would have had in mind the micro-management of diet; more likely that he would have thought in terms such as alcoholic overindulgence (Allmark, 2005). But it must have been clear to him, as it is to us, that this is only part of the story; many who overindulge stay well; many who do not become seriously ill. Aristotle's line here seems to be that living well, as virtue requires, only makes happiness possible; it does not guarantee it. He talks of the need for external goods to ensure happiness (1178a). These include sufficient intelligence and rationality, money, and time for leisure. In doing so, he denies the possibility of happiness for women and slaves (both deemed irrational as a type) and menial workers (who have insufficient leisure). Also required is health that is good enough to allow the person to live in accordance with virtue, something presumably denied to those with incapacitating illness (1115b; 1149a). As such illness can rob even virtuous, leisured men of happiness.

Epicurus and the Stoics would not have this (Annas, 1993; Nussbaum, 2009). They disliked the exclusivity of Aristotle's account of happiness and disliked also its failure to meet the first criterion of justice, that our fate is our own. Both Epicurus and the Stoics believed that virtue is sufficient for happiness even in the face of apparent misfortune. Happiness is found in *ataraxia*, a state of indifference to the pleasures and pains of the world, particularly bodily ones. Ill-health is often related to pain; as such, this account would say that it cannot undermine happiness. Of dying, Epicurus says,

Going through this day of my life, which is at one and the same time blissful and my last, I write this to you. My sufferings from kidney stone and dysentery keep me continual company, lacking nothing of their natural force. But over against all these I set joy of the soul at the memory of our past discussions. [cited and translated by Nussbaum (2009, p. 111)]

It is unclear, however, how this approach can hold up in the face of illness such as dementia. The illness itself would seem to undermine *ataraxia*. The same would hold true of most mental and some physical illness, such as those where analgesia and anxiolitics that undermine consciousness are required to control symptoms.

To sum up, one way in which we make sense of calamity is through reconciling it with our sense of justice. Part of this is the sense that how our lives go should be a product of how we run them. In many religious traditions the apparent injustice is only put right after death. This post-mortem righting of wrongs is denied to most classical philosophers as to modern atheists. The picture we get from the classical philosophers is fairly bleak. Aristotle seems to hold out the hope of happiness for the few, and good fortune plays a large part in this. Epicurus and the Stoics hold out the hope for many, but their vision of happiness as indifferent to calamity seems implausible; indeed, it seems to suggest that happiness is possible in this world only for those who disdain its pleasures in order to avoid its pain. Even then, calamities can surely yet find you in the form of serious mental illness.

This ancient conflict between justice and fate remains with us. Calamities baffle us precisely because they seem to confound justice. In our narratives making sense of serious illness we sometimes call upon the religious justice-post-mortem tradition, as when we say someone is in a better place, or is at peace now. We also see attempts to reconcile justice and fate that reflect those of Aristotle and later philosophers. We speak with admiration of those who battle, sometimes *stoically*, against their illness; and we set their example against those who have *just given up*. We seek to blame people for their illness; heart disease and some cancers are down to lifestyle; those who suffer these illnesses are set against the

blameless; those who can rightfully say 'I didn't ask for this.' As nurses we should beware these stories; they convey a falsehood, that illness is visited on those who deserve it; they have the power to harm those we care for, as when we attribute blame; they belong to a world in which justice prevails; this, at best, is only partially true of our own. I know this well when I sit with my mum.

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