

The Intellectual's Responsibilities

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Universalism and the Intellectual

The term “public intellectual” is redundant. There is—and can be—no such thing as a private intellectual. An intellectual is someone who, by way of words and arguments, aims to influence others. Like Diogenes in search of an honest man, the intellectual is always in search of a public, an audience.

The “public intellectual,” we are to understand, is a man speaking to men (to recall Wordsworth’s announced ambition) or a citizen talking to fellow citizens. Instead of addressing a coterie of intimates or specialists, the public intellectual seeks a broader audience, loosely understood as the literate members of her society. The ideal is humanist, generalist, and democratic. The speech and/or writing are accessible and available to all.

Kant argues that genius is idiosyncratic and singular, but the pressure of communication calls for the tempering of genius by taste. He insists that “taste...consists in disciplining (or training) genius” and provides “the form of a concept’s exhibition, the form by which this concept is universally communicated.”¹ Kant ups the stakes by calling for “universal communicability.” Intellectuals and artists alike, he suggests, should strive to exhibit their ideas in a form all can understand.

Hegel offers his own version of this ideal of universality, when he introduces the concept of “the universal class” that, in contrast with the workers and the capitalists, makes “the universal interests of society” its “business.” He appears to be talking about the

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (1790; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) 188, 180.

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philosopher or the intellectual here and hopes that “his private interest may thus find satisfaction in his labour for the universal.”²

Combining Kant and Hegel, we get a portrait of the intellectual as a person who works for the good of the universal and for the good of all humanity with no exclusions and exceptions, and who performs that work in a language that communicates that good and the ways it might be activated in a form all can understand. Form fits content here—and both take their stand on the universal.

Today, the universal still exerts pressures on intellectuals—and I want to argue that those pressures are, for the most part, good things.³ That the term “public intellectual” stands as a goad and a reproach to intellectuals is more often productive than not. It represents a felt responsibility to speak to the *demos* on issues for which all citizens should take responsibility.

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But to address one's fellow citizens is not to address all of humankind. Universalism seems to depend on the suspension of the elementary principles of rhetoric, for every spoken or written utterance is partly shaped by the rhetor's sense of the specific characteristics of the imagined audience. And it is impossible to take all of humankind as one's real or imagined audience. For starters, every utterance is only made in one language among the multitude of languages spoken on earth. In addition, the intellectual, like any other producer of language, is joining a conversation, is addressing things that have been previously said and the people who have attended to those previous sayings.⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin argues that:

Discourse—in any of its forms, quotidian, rhetorical, scholarly—cannot fail to be oriented toward the “already uttered,” the “already known,” the “common opinion” and so forth.... The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly,

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. W. Dyde (1820; Amherst: Prometheus, 1996) par. 205, p. 202.

³ I am influenced here by John Michael's superb *Anxious Intellectuals: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals, and Enlightenment Values* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); see especially 9–14.

⁴ Here is Kenneth Burke's description of this “unending conversation”: “Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.” *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 110–1. We can add that there are multiple conversations of this sort on the planet.

oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction.⁵

Since every word is so firmly embedded in its relations to the already spoken and to the anticipated answer of its imagined audience, every word is situated, is bound by the localities of its occasion. No word is self-sufficient—and the meaning of any word will change if we change its context. *The Iliad* means something different when heard sung by an ancient Greek poet than when read in a “great books” course in 2007. Its “universality” is shattered once we recognize that it signifies differently at different times and in different situations. Charles Taylor develops this point when he insists that any singular act of communication between two people can only succeed if it leans on a whole set of background “assumptions buried in everyday custom.... A word has meaning only within a lexicon and a context of linguistic practices, which are ultimately embedded in a way of life.”⁶ Translated into English, displaced from a Greek setting to an American classroom, *The Iliad* cannot mean exactly the same thing.

But, surely, it can mean some of the same things. Even if we accept that there are plural “ways of life,” multiple cultures, are we doomed to a complete lack of communication across the lines of difference? Two ways to bridge this gap, one roughly conservative, the other roughly liberal, have frequently been offered, each of which tries to pull us back toward universality. The conservative appeal has been to “human nature” as a common substrate beneath surface differences between languages, cultures, and histories. Human nature arguments are usually (although not always) conservative because they posit limits that cannot be overcome and, thus, designate in advance the impossibility or reprehensible “unnaturalness” of certain human behaviors or imagined social arrangements.

Liberals have preferred appeals to reason. Universal in its indication of truths that all right-thinking persons of any time and any place will acknowledge, reason has the advantage of serving as an ideal. The sway of reason is hardly a fact. Most people are unreasonable. But we all have the potential to be reasonable. When we reach that blessed condition, we will not only all understand each other but also all live in much better harmony, perhaps even in the “perpetual peace” that Kant hoped humans would achieve.⁷ If we ever are to attain “universal communicability,” Kant believed it would be the result of having successfully established reason as our *lingua franca*.

⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” as quoted in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2001) 1,204–5.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 91, 93.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 93–130.

In short, conservatives believe we already possess a common humanity and unity under the appearance of differences—and that that commonality serves as a standard to rein in the production of novel differences and to condemn various existing differences. Liberals, on the other hand, think that commonality is out in front of us, something to be achieved through the attainment of an ideal rationality.⁸

Reasons and American Pragmatism

American pragmatism is a version of liberalism, but one that wants to substitute “reasons” in the plural for the Reason found in Kant. In *Articulating Reasons*, Robert Brandom offers a pragmatist’s understanding of social interaction that focuses on “the giving and asking for reasons.”⁹ A belief, a way of life, and an unconscious assumption are all habits taken for granted until subjected to the more skeptical view of an other. It is in explaining ourselves to others that we come to articulate, to make explicit for ourselves and for those others, the plausible reasons we can offer for those beliefs, ways of life, customs, and assumptions—as well as for the actions that express and embody them. Reasons are fundamentally intersubjective. They only arise through our relations with others. And the more different those others are, the less any particular belief will seem self-evident.

The promiscuous mixing of peoples that characterizes modernity subjects all ways of life to question. Modern self-consciousness grows out of the increased contact with the different, a contact that is painful and has led to violence. In that context, both fundamentalist and liberal rationalist attempts to find a stable ground of commonality beneath the differences are understandable, even if (as I believe) counterproductive. Pluralism is not a problem to be alleviated but an inevitable condition that we need to learn how to live with.

Reasons, then, as contrasted to Reason, are situational. They are addressed to specific others in specific contexts. Intellectuals are hardly the only ones who articulate reasons, but they do so more formally and, as it were, as their primary vocation. Kenneth Burke offers a useful characterization of the social bases for reasons that I want to emphasize here, even though he uses “reason” in the singular. Burke writes:

⁸ Kant’s most succinct statement of this goal of achieved rationality as out in front of us, still to be attained, is found in “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, 54–60. It’s important to note that I am only characterizing conservative versus liberal universalisms here. There are also conservative versus liberal versions of pluralism, both of which deny, albeit in different ways, any universalism based on either human nature or reason.

⁹ Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 48. Brandom calls his position “a *rationalist* pragmatism” because it gives “pride of place to practices of giving and asking for reasons, understanding them as conferring conceptual content on performances, expressions, and states suitably caught up in those practices” (11, Brandom’s emphasis).

The “social” aspect of language is “reason.” Reason is a complex technique for “checking” one’s assertions by public reference. And insofar as one forms his mind by encompassing such linguistic equipment, he learns to use this technique of checking “spontaneously,” with varying degrees of accuracy and scope.... Hence, implicit in both language and reason (logos, word) there is a *social* basis of reference affecting the individual.¹⁰

We can parse Burke’s point here by returning to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and its distinction between thinking for oneself and thinking from the standpoint of everyone else. The latter, Kant tells us,

indicates a man with a *broadened way of thinking* if he overrides the private subjective conditions of his judgment, into which so many others are locked, as it were, and reflects on his own judgment from a *universal standpoint* (which he can determine only by transferring himself to the standpoint of others).¹¹

Burke and Bakhtin push us to understand “broadened thinking” rhetorically. It is the pressure of the others to whom one addresses oneself, the pressure of the others who witness one’s actions and who require an explanation for those actions, that pushes the self to take their viewpoints into account. Reflection is a response to the ever-present judgment of myself by others. Kant moves too quickly from the self to the universal. We would do better to understand those others as real people, as, in short, one’s audience, people rooted in a place and time, not humanity in general. Responsibility, then, can be understood in terms of the audience to which one is responding.

The term “public intellectual” is almost always contrastive.

The term “public intellectual” evokes two sets of questions. The first is: what reasons does this person articulate as underwriting her actions, beliefs, recommendations, and (ultimately) way of being in the world and how convincing are these reasons? The second is: to what specific others does this person feel answerable? Or, stated differently: Whom does she think she should—even must—address? To whom is she responsible? To whose objections and queries does she feel bound to respond? To which of the many possible publics does she direct her utterances?

The term “public intellectual” is almost always contrastive. This writer is praised for addressing the right public in contrast to that writer who is castigated for addressing the wrong one. Often enough, the grounds of the contrast are between someone who is, presumably, writing for a “broader” audience instead of for a narrow, more specialized

¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1961) 342.

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 161, Kant’s emphasis.

one. The Kantian desire to push us toward the universal becomes a stick with which to beat writers who focus on more particularized interlocutors.

The intellectual, I am suggesting, cannot address the whole universe.

This pragmatist account is meant to introduce a dynamic understanding of everything involved in the articulation of reasons. What counts as convincing reasons (to one's self as well as to others) will shift over time and from context to context. Similarly, the audience to which one feels most answerable will also shift. Each self is constantly buffeted by the judgments and demands of the other selves with whom he or she occupies the world. The universal provides one framework for articulating those demands, but it is hardly the only one. As recent critics of utilitarianism have been at pains to point out, a universalist morality that expects us to treat everyone, even those with whom we are intimate, exactly the same offers an implausible model of equal, undifferentiated answerability (responsibility) to others. Individuals are more vulnerable and more partial to, more fully in dialogue with, some people than with others. The difficulty is to make judgments about when such partiality is unjustified and when it is morally reprehensible.

The intellectual, I am suggesting, cannot address the whole universe. Her words and arguments will, inevitably, be directed to a projected audience that falls short of the universal. Her ability even to reach that desired audience is, in large part, out of her control. But the audience that her words implicitly—and often enough explicitly—identify as her desired auditors does mark her understanding of her responsibilities. These are the others to whom she holds herself accountable. They are the ones she has to convince or please to feel herself justified, perhaps even to believe in herself. These are the people she may aspire to convince as a first step toward cooperation. So it is a legitimate question to ask of anyone: to whom do you address yourself? The answer to that question tells us a lot about the aspirations and the moral commitments of the respondent. The word—and the reasons it communicates—pulls the self out into relation with others.¹²

Now I want to turn my attention to a different question. Not “to whom do you speak?” but “for whom do you speak?” Here we move from a condition—addressing others to whom one feels responsible—that is shared by all humans as part of their sociality to an issue much more specific to intellectuals. Most people, I think it fair to say, feel no impulse to speak for anyone but themselves. They are passionately engaged in the various interactions that constitute their lives, and their words are the ongoing negotiations, expressions, requests, justifications, projections, and renderings of information

¹² In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant claims that “the universal *feeling of sympathy*, and the ability to engage universally in very intimate *communication*...constitute the sociability that befits [our] humanity” (231).

that comprise their social relations. The notion that specific social groups need a collective articulation seems another by-product of pluralism—and particularly of pluralism internal to what is understood as a single society, in contrast to the pluralism of multiple different, but separate, societies. Within a plural society, specific groups will desire to be “represented” in both senses of the word. The group will want a representative at the table when various decisions are made that will have an impact on all members of the society, but the group will also want the reasons for its way of life, for its protection of its interests, represented in utterances directed to other members of the polity who are not of its group. At stake here is not conversion (at least not in all cases). A group does not need to convince others to abandon their previous group and now join it instead. Rather, any particular group only needs to establish its legitimacy as an acceptable way of life, as a full-fledged member of the polity, with a recognized claim to be in on the discussions when any overarching decision or policy is being considered. Recognition across lines of difference, not unity, is the goal. But even attaining recognition depends on communicability, on being able to make a case to dissimilar others for one’s own legitimacy.¹³

Critics of liberalism often argue that this requirement of communicability opens the door to the hegemony of Kantian Reason. Only groups that can qualify as “reasonable” can gain recognition—and, thus, the very claim to universality underwrites exclusion.¹⁴ But such critics, of course, offer reasons for their argument, while almost always castigating liberalism for not being universal enough, for not being all-inclusive. I guess that tolerance of all other human beings, despite complete incomprehension of their reasons for their way of life, is possible wherever we could create zones of mutual indifference and mutual non-interference. We would feel no responsibility, no answerability, to them—and vice versa. But the growing interconnectedness in a globalized world makes such non-contact unlikely. More crucially for me, there is also the persistent (although not universal) fact that people want to communicate their way of life to others in a manner that gains recognition and that, crucially, establishes the legitimacy of their claims to certain goods, from material necessities to political participation and/or power.

Such claims are usually, today, articulated in a vocabulary of rights. Rights establish immunities, obligations, and access to goods in societies with multiple—often competing and sometimes more fully conflicting—groups. It is hard to imagine how a polity

¹³ For good discussions of the concept of “recognition” and how it might be placed among other desires expressed by citizens in modern polities, see Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003). Patchen Markell’s *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) offers a dissenting view based on the contention that the recognition is almost always attached to hierarchies that limit the possibilities of equality and justice.

¹⁴ See Stanley Fish, “The Trouble with Tolerance,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education: The Chronicle Review* (10 November 2006): <<http://chronicle.com/temp/reprint.php?id=f2281gdy909q6jfczpj22f7gtk3cqft>>.

could adjudicate such conflicts without the various groups representing their needs and their claims—and their reasons for believing those claims legitimate. The alternative would seem to be slugging it out in non-verbal combat, or having no contact at all with one another. The first is undesirable; the second has become increasingly unfeasible.

So, for better or worse, it seems to me that communication across lines of difference is going to remain unavoidable and crucial. And, in large part, the task of speaking for, of representing, various groups defines the intellectual. One implicit charge in the talk about “public intellectuals” is that non-public intellectuals only talk to the converted. In the “echo-chamber” of the academy or of politically partisan blogs, the intellectual never feels pressured to make her representation of a viewpoint or an identity accessible or sympathetic to those who do not share it. The worry here—a worry heightened by the most recent wave of immigration to this country—is that the “public sphere” itself is disintegrating into subcultural enclaves, with no communication between one enclave and the next. The academic intellectual only talks to his professional peers, does not see any responsibility to represent anyone but himself, and really only feels responsible for the advancement of his career within an institutional structure that requires him to publish. Under such terms, publication has lost its connection to “publicness.”

Such criticisms all too often substitute a non-existent generalized “public” for the specific publics (understood, minimally, as people whom one does not know personally) that published work addresses. We would do better to identify the public, the specific audience, to which the intellectual addresses herself. But I am sympathetic to the concern that the academic intellectual only represents herself. The issue for me is not selfishness, but marginality. The humanities and the arts have consistently undermined the possibility that their words—and other public performances—would be heeded by presenting those utterances as one person’s take on the world. The humanities and the arts have fetishized the “new” and the “original,” with each practitioner geared towards making his or her own unique “contribution” to the field. Even within rough communities of agreement (for example, liberal political theorists), one is authorized to publish only on the basis of disagreement in at least some details with other members of the community. Humanists and artists almost never speak in a collective voice. The notable exception is when they sign letters protesting the mistreatment of intellectuals by repressive regimes.

The intellectual who represents a group will be called an ideologue. For that reason, Hegel is right when he identifies irony as a persistent temptation.¹⁵ Especially in lib-

¹⁵ Hegel identifies irony as “absolute self-complacency” and “a solitary worship of” oneself, characterized as the attitude that “[i]t is not the subject-matter which is excellent, but I am the excellent thing, and am master of law and fact. I toy with them at my pleasure, and can enjoy myself only when I ironically know and permit the highest to be submerged” (Hegel, par. 140, p. 149). Irony is a strategy for dissociating one’s self from any determinate content—and thus a means for preserving the self’s purity through its refusal to be identified with any cause, belief, or action in particular.

eral societies that emphasize self-determination, there will always be the impulse to maintain one's purity by refusing to align oneself with anything. The intellectual will not represent anything except the sole honest man, fearlessly pointing out the venality—and worse—of all. In an evil world, the ironic intellectual is never responsible for any of that evil. His hands are clean. Eschewing the world of action and its consequences, the ironist hides in the unrealized realm of words. He espouses nothing and condemns all.

Taking responsibility means taking the risk of being an ideologue. The solution to ideology is not the work of the individual, is not the creation, by some master thinker, of a nonpartisan discourse that presents the truth. Universality of that sort, all wrapped up and contained in one all-encompassing discourse (Hegel's *Geist*), is unattainable. We must trust instead in the cacophony of the public square, where the various positions contend for attention, affirmation, and acclaim.

Democracy can go horribly wrong; it is not, in every instance, self-correcting. But the free and open contention of competing visions, coupled with the *demos's* periodic ability to choose among them, provides one of the few safeguards against the tyranny of imposed partialities. The more volatile the political scene and the less any group has the ability to hold power for long periods of time, the better. All the various players have good reason to stay in the game if they have a reasonable chance to win it sometimes. And those who are currently on the outs have an incentive to publicize loudly and often the ideological shortcomings and actual crimes and misdemeanors of those in power.

In short, one thing intellectuals in a democracy should represent is a commitment to full and open public discourse.

In short, one thing intellectuals in a democracy should represent is a commitment to full and open public discourse.¹⁶ That commitment is, of course, partly self-serving, but it also represents a more general interest in a discursive process that prevents the ossification of power. The intellectual, to a certain (albeit not total) extent, can evade the dangers of being an ideologue by becoming a partisan of the process by which all ideologies are checked and balanced by competing visions.

This argument about a felt responsibility to advocate free speech in an open public square reminds us that in many countries, at many times, it has been dangerous to speak out. Dissident intellectuals have their opportunities for heroism—and all honor to those who have risen to the occasion. The intellectual is not necessarily an adversary

¹⁶ Again, Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" is a foundational text for this argument. "The *public* use of man's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men.... But by the public use of one's own reason I mean that use which anyone can make of it *as a man of learning* addressing the entire *reading public*" (55, Kant's emphasis).

of the powers that be, but in championing a more inclusive public discourse that makes every partial and partisan position subject to contestation, a universal form is preferred to the passionate content of this or that group. Power rarely attains or even aspires to the universal; it is held by a particular group and wielded in that group's name and to its advantage. When they strive to represent the universal, intellectuals are very likely to knock heads with power.

Power, Violence, and the Intellectual

That conflict is not going to be confined to questions of political form and the processes of political discourse and decision-making. Giorgio Agamben is the writer in our own time who most eloquently identifies the way in which power expresses itself, most baldly and dramatically, as the power over life and death. He calls our particular attention to the "state of exception," to the persistent return of special circumstances, of emergencies, that power insists legitimates the taking of lives.¹⁷ Less dramatically, but still forcefully, Kant also aligned himself against war and killing in his essay, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch."

The fact that violence is always rhetorical as well as physical places it in the intellectual's domain.

Killing is, of course, physical. But the deaths inflicted by states and other political institutions are always preceded and followed by speech. Violence is always interpreted, argued for or denounced, or taken as sending a message. "Our" response to "their" violence is predicated on interpreting their violence—and displays all the features of Bakhtin's description of the speech situation. All too

often that interpretation posits that we have reached the end of words, that they are challenging our resolve and our will, that they cannot be allowed to prevail, and that we must prevail instead.¹⁸

The messages understood as moving between rivals (or enemies) are supplemented by the words used to legitimize violence to those on our side or to neutral onlookers. In the rhetoric of justification, four notes are almost inevitably struck to differentiate our killing from theirs. First, our aims are moral while theirs are not. Second, they kill innocent people, but we only kill people who deserve to die. Third, their actions are gratuitous, but ours are necessary. We are forced—by moral reasons or reasons of self-defense—to

¹⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 83. The whole book, but especially part two, sections three and four, and part three, is relevant to the position I articulate here.

¹⁸ My thinking on violence has been greatly influenced by conversations with Dustin Howes and by his doctoral thesis, "Violence and the Possibilities of Politics" (Department of Political Science, University of North Carolina, 2005).

kill. They have no such legitimizing reasons. Finally, as Agamben notes, we deny that killing is part and parcel of the normal functioning of power. We declare that a power usually committed to enabling and fostering life is here compelled to declare a “state of exception,” to kill reluctantly because of exigent circumstances.

Does power everywhere and always have blood on its hands? No. But we can suspect, after reading Hegel on the master/slave dialectic and Weber on the state’s monopoly of legitimate violence, that power is intimately bound up with violence. And we can assert, if we consider the evidence of the past seventy years, that state-inflicted death constitutes the vast majority of the human deaths caused by another human. We can also reflect that we would have to go back to at least Herbert Hoover and Calvin Coolidge to find an American president who did not have blood on his hands. (Jimmy Carter was less addicted to foreign adventurism than most, but even he sent the helicopters into Iran in an ill-fated attempt to free the hostages.)

The fact that violence is always rhetorical as well as physical places it in the intellectual’s domain. Reasons for violence are enunciated in public and those reasons should be examined and contested. In any age, but especially in a time of perpetual war, of an unending state of emergency, the intellectual should not allow the arguments for the necessity of war to go unchallenged. The intellectual should address the specific words currently used to justify violence.

On the level of content, what could represent a more universal value than life? It seems fair to say that most people prefer being alive to being dead. And even those who do choose death over life (suicides, suicide bombers, and anyone who sacrifices her life for any cause) certainly want their deaths to be a choice, to be something they caused to happen, not a fate imposed upon them by someone else or by an external power. Speaking of the miseries industrial capitalism brought to Victorian England, John Ruskin memorably declared “there is no wealth but life”:

To be “valuable,” therefore, is to “avail towards life.” A truly valuable or availing thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength. In proportion as it does not lead to life, or as its strength is broken, it is less valuable; in proportion as it leads away from life, it is unvaluable or malignant.¹⁹

Ruskin suggests “we ought to have a correspondent term” to wealth—he offers “illth”—to designate those things which impede the flourishing of life or lead even more directly to death.²⁰

¹⁹ John Ruskin, “Ad Valorem,” *Unto This Last*, as quoted in *The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John D. Rosenberg (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) 270, 258.

²⁰ Ruskin 262.

In fact, life seems so obvious and universal a good that the notion appears vacuous. Everyone says they are acting in the name of life, so what is there to contest? Who isn't for life? The notion, however, is not self-evident. What counts as a life worth living—and what is needed to have the actual capability to live such a life?²¹ Both the definition of life and our understanding of its requirements keep changing. New articulations of the ideal and new reasons for why we should honor it in our specific time and locale are needed. What responsibility do I have—or does the state have—to afford to others the resources needed to flourish? How far does that responsibility, if it is admitted, extend? Beyond my family, beyond the citizens of my country?

Ruskin's *Unto This Last* is so compelling because he makes clear all the ways that our polities are organized to deny life itself to many—and a life worth living to many more. Underneath all the self-justifying rhetoric, all the sophistries about necessity and emergencies and realistically responding to various exigencies (of the market, of inevitable scarcity, of malignant enemies, of recalcitrant and irremediable human nature), lie actions that bring death.

The intellectual who calls all these familiar rhetorical moves into question will be called naive after she is called vacuous. “Of course everyone is for life” is the first response; “but you can't have a world in which everyone gets life” is the second—“It's a jungle out there—and some (our?) lives can only be sustained at the cost of others' lives. It's kill or be killed.” The intellectual who champions life should respond that violence is never successfully instrumental. It never simply produces the ends—no matter what they are—for which it aims. The effects of violence—on the perpetrator as well as on the victim—are incalculable in advance. History suggests violence is a great destroyer; it does not create anything. You cannot preserve a way of life through violence; once you take up arms, you kiss your old way of life goodbye. Violence does not preserve life; it transforms life into something else, almost never something for the better.

The life-affirming intellectual should also ask hard questions about just who is being “realistic” in these matters. The rhetorics of violence persistently divert our attention from the maimed, suffering, and dead bodies that violence produces. Think of the way the words “sacrifice” and “victory” are deployed in just about every speech you will ever hear about war. Is there any connection between these terms and the dead bodies the war is producing daily? The intellectual who takes responsibility for life will remind us

²¹ Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) develops a “capabilities approach” that emphasizes “what avails to life” (Ruskin's phrase, and not one Sen uses) in an idiom appropriate to our time. Sen's argument is that polities should strive to provide each person “the capability to achieve functionings that he or she has reason to value” (4–5). Martha C. Nussbaum in *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) understands Sen's position as entailing, at least, “a decent social minimum” (75) of the material resources needed to sustain life and, more optimally, the resources for a “flourishing life” (88), one in which the person's capabilities (or talents) can be fully developed.

again and again of the fact that violence means killing and maiming. She will ask us to be suspicious, very suspicious, of the words in which we cloak violence, in which we justify it, and by which we avoid apprehending its real effects on the ground. We have an ever-present capacity to avert our eyes and to tolerate the deaths we cause to others by rendering them almost invisible—distanced geographically and wrapped up in obfuscating words. We cultivate, more than half-willingly, a blindness that renders claims to be “realistic” delusory.

The intellectual who speaks for life should also question justificatory distinctions made between “innocent” and “non-innocent” victims. At least since the Blitz of 1940, warfare has pretty much obliterated the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. (In fact, there is much to suggest that such a distinction rarely meant anything at all. Nothing in Thucydides suggests the distinction ever prevailed in more than a tiny number of wars in human history.) Furthermore, in what sense are soldiers not innocent? Is the civilian Secretary of Defense more innocent than the soldier he sent into battle? You get into very swampy moral ground once you decide that some people deserve to be victims of violence. And even if we could establish a distinction between deserving and undeserving victims, modern warfare wouldn't observe it in practice.

The intellectual who takes responsibility for life champions a universal that everyone claims to honor, but which hardly ever manages to prevail.

To think that violence can be “surgical,” that it can avoid “collateral damage,” is another delusion, another way of looking away from the deaths one is inflicting. When you begin to make distinctions between “good” violence and “bad” violence, “acceptable” versus “criminal” violence, or “surgical” versus “indiscriminate” violence, the rhetorics deployed, more often than not, provide a means for not even seeing the consequences of the violence that is done to other human beings.

Affirming life also allows a candid look at the pleasure some humans take in destruction—and in causing pain to others. Since violence has proven so unreliable as an instrumental means toward desired ends, we must conclude that the human attraction to it cannot be based on its efficacy. Push aside the rhetorics of necessity and/or moralism, and it's not hard to see the glee of a teenager who throws a brick through a plate glass window or a child who stomps on a sand castle. Certainly some of our soldiers—and many of those in the defense industry—get a charge out of the high-tech gadgetry that can blow things and people to smithereens. Polite conversation, and a respect for the boots on the ground who have it hard, is supposed to constrain any acknowledgment of the joys of combat, the highs of killing.

The intellectual who takes responsibility for life champions a universal that everyone claims to honor, but which hardly ever manages to prevail. She must give that universal a local habitation and name while contesting all the reasons offered for inflicting death.

She will speak to a specific audience in a specific situation about actions that threaten to or actually do extinguish the lives of specific people. The universal will be mobilized in particular circumstances. Ruskin's heresies in *Unto This Last* caused a public outcry that led his publisher to suspend publication of the book. Gandhi, who was deeply influenced by that Ruskin text, lived just long enough before his own violent death to see the mass killings that accompanied India's achievement of independence. Perhaps honoring the value of life, whether it is understood as universal or not, is unattainable. Certainly history has never known a world without wars, a society in which some have not inflicted death on others. Maybe the world would be no worse off if Ruskins and Gandhis did not exist to articulate their protest against the attacks on life, their alternative visions. But I would choose a world with them over one without. The wider their conception of their responsibility, and the more capacious their sense of the other humans to whom they are answerable, the greater service intellectuals can render in making us ponder the terms on which our polity affords some people life and justifies dealing out death to others.