

Michael Otsuka's remarks at Jerry Cohen's funeral

All Souls College Chapel, 11 August 2009

One of the many nice things about the wonderful conference in January that Adam and Stuart organized to celebrate Jerry's retirement was the fond and loving tributes from a *small* sample of Jerry's many friends and former students. I was not, myself, on that occasion, able to manage more than the briefest of tributes. I explained then that I would not dare try to say more, since I knew that if I did it would end in tears, literally. But I must try to say more today.

I want to begin just by *marvelling* at the *sheer brilliance* of Jerry's philosophical contributions. There is not another political philosopher who has made his case more clearly, and more incisively, and more *decisively* than Jerry did. Not just among his contemporaries, but at any point in the history of political philosophy going back all the way to Socrates. Now if you think I must now be exercising my eulogistic license to exaggerate, I defy you to come up with a compelling counterexample.

I well recall reading Jerry's essay on 'The Labour Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation' as a graduate student, and my awe as I witnessed the manner in which all the pieces fell into place and welded together into watertight arguments. To this day, I haven't found a more relentlessly rigorously argued paper in political philosophy. It was also a thrill to discover, when I read this for the first time, that my supervisor was a genius. And at this point I can hear an interjection from Jerry: "You mean to tell me that you hadn't *already* come to realize this?!"

Jerry's capacity to dismantle the views and arguments of others was one of the many talents for which he was justly famous. But it was always demolition out of morally engaged conviction, with a specific aim and purpose in mind. His polestar was a clear, distinctive, and demanding ideal of equality.

Jerry's own positive conception of egalitarian justice emerged from the following: his assault on the libertarianism of the late Robert Nozick; his resistance to the late John Rawls's justification of inequality; and from his internecine skirmishes with the egalitarianism of the thankfully very *un*late Ronald Dworkin, as I imagine Jerry would have described Ronnie in this context. Out of Jerry's engagement with these three great political philosophers of the late twentieth century, he emerged as the fourth great political philosopher.

I want to say a few words about Jerry's last big book – *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. This was the culmination of his life's work as a philosopher. I think of it as from his late Beethoven period. It has a complex, fugal quality and dispenses with conventional structures. It takes us to strange and sublime places, which leave some of the rest of us scratching our heads. I'm thinking, in particular, of his long meditation on facts and principles. And I want to share a vintage-Jerry passage from this book. Here's what Jerry says:

I agree with the Socrato-Platonic view that ... no list of examples reveals what it is about the examples that makes *each* an example of justice. Until we unearth the fact-free principle that governs our fact-loaded particular judgments about justice, we don't know *why* we think what we *think* just[,] *is* just. And we have to retreat to ... justice in its purity to figure out how to institute as much justice as possible inside the cave.

The "lovers of sights and sounds" in Book V of Plato's *Republic* think it suffices ... to say what counts as **just** *within* the world of sights and sounds. They scarcely recognize the question What is justice, *as such*? ... [But] Plato thinks, and I agree, that you need to have a view of what justice *itself* is[,] to recognize that justice dictates [*this* particular principle when *those* facts obtain]. [And] that is how justice transcends the facts of the world. [p. 291]

Jerry's book is an extended critical meditation on Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, though of course it is also much more than that. Rawls says, in the last paragraph of that book, that 'Purity of heart, if one could attain it, would be to see clearly and to act with grace and self-command from' 'the perspective of eternity'. It was Jerry's achievement to show Rawls the way out of the cave and to that point of view of eternity.

Jerry regarded this as his last big philosophical project. He did not want to write another big book in his retirement and he felt that he had said all the things of significance he had been impassioned to say as a political philosopher. He wanted to continue to write and had some work in progress at the time of his death. But these pieces were of a more speculative, contemplative nature. So although the life which he was still living *so intensely* was cut short last week, and philosophy would have continued to engage and fascinate him for as long as he might have lived, he really did feel that he was a philosopher in retirement. He felt content that there was no longer the striving to write and create.

We are fortunate to have some beautiful photographs of the day Jerry moved out of his set of rooms in All Souls College when he retired last summer. He told me and others afterwards that in the months and days before, he had been feeling somewhat anxious and gloomy about his coming departure. But on the day itself, he found it *easy* to let go, and felt only how *fortunate* he was to have been *blessed* with the *23 years* he had enjoyed at All Souls. He realized that it would be *greedy* to *despair* that this could not last longer. The photographs capture Jerry's serenity and happiness on the day.

As it happens, I also knew Jerry for 23 years. I've had the enormous good fortune to be blessed for these 23 years with the most wonderful friend. It would be *greedy* for me to despair that this friendship cannot continue. But, unlike Jerry, I'm so ... very ... greedy.