

WE ARE ASSIGNED TO DIS/CONTENTMENT WITH CONTINGENCY

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If I were to have a conversation with you on the theme of this Thinksheet, I'd appreciate your presenting me with a two-column sheet filled with your completion of the generic stems "I'm contented with..." & "I'm discontented with...". Then I'd like to sit opposite from you & work through your lists while imagining that the occupants of the other two chairs, with voice & vote, are "justification" & "justice." Yes, I'd've done my sheet, too! If the conversation "worked," we'd finish not only with a deeper, truer understanding of each other but also with clearer, livelier, more workable doctrines of justification & justice. What's the philosophical category within which our conversation would have taken place? CONTINGENCY, the tangency or touch of our several lives, yours & mine, as individual genotypes with separate time-space histories, loves-hates, hopes-fears, strengths-weaknesses, & life-situations affording each greater or fewer opportunities (by factors variously called "class," "luck," "benefaction," "vocation")....This Thinksheet's concern? For concreteness (the focus of phenomenological & existential philosophers, & thus the Thinksheet's philosophical caste), over against the nominalistic tendency to deal with ideas-doctrines such as "justification" & "justice" abstractly, which is to say with false concreteness, as though they had some objective in-themselves content. Ideology & dogmatism & then violence to truth & neighbor occur when such false concretes are pressed down upon living, striving, untidy, unpredictable flesh-&-blood & on human structures (movements, laws, institutions). (NOTE that in "contingency," my accent is not on indeterminate potentiality but on pre-determinate actuality, the fact that each of us is "thrown" [Heidegger] into a zygote-genotype of capabilities-limits & into a particular family with the personal & interpersonal strengths/weaknesses therein & with a specific class & status in the community. Our governing question, here, is this: Among all these concretenesses & inter/dependencies, how are we to know what to be dis/content with for ourselves & others?) I shall do no more than suggest some possible directions of the conversation....

1. In old stable societies such as the pre-WWI & WWI Britain of "Upstairs, Downstairs," social engineering was an academic dream of library-haunters (eg, Marx in the British Museum [Library]); but some months before the Great War ended the year of my birth, the dream became the Russian Revolution, which became the now-dissolving Second World. Now we are beginning to confront the powers & problems of genetic engineering. Till now, humanity had to be content with the makeup of each genotype, each individual: nothing could be done about the "throwtness," givenness, of anybody's genes. Now the rich are beginning to wonder whether they're not responsible for checking out a pregnancy for possible correction of genetic defects. Here's a whole new form of discontentment. Likewise, the threshold of discontent vis-a-vis our health has been lowered: I consulted four levels of experts before becoming content that nothing medical could be done to cure my reading-blindness in one eye--but almost everywhere else on earth, I'd not have had ground to be discontented so elaborately so long. Dis/contentment, then, is a factor of hope, & vice versa.

2. Wm. Safire is on target in calling '89 (in his column today) "the year of freedom," driven by the dream become hope of "a way of freedom unbounded by arbitrary power." And I'm high enough, here on the brink of '90, to call this the century of the bourgeoisie, of people power, of what we began to call right after WWII "the revolution of rising expectations." Now it's time for prophets to examine the quality of the expectations: the Tower of Babel was a rising expectation that irritated God into distributive action. I am far from rich (in comparison with whom?), but I must resist--on pain of irreversible damage to the ecosphere--those whose expectations rise as high as my "living standard." Or in other words, how are we going to keep the Third World down (but help it to rise from being down-&-out)? The East Germans' eco-level is better both for humans & for the planet (& thus for future humans): how do we keep them from becoming as fat & corrupt as the West Germans? (In affluence, luxuries are necessities: in poverty, necessities are luxuries.) Could I benefit the poor & strike a blow for the environment by divesting myself of all but bare necessities, as St. Francis stood naked before his wealthy cloth-merchant father? **PROBLEM:** I'm highly contented with what I have, but somewhat discontented with what I am & am doing about "justification & justice." You are not surprised

about SELF about OTHERS

that this leads me to grid-thinking:

Immediately we are confronted by the complexity of the task of letting the grid raise questions about

"justification & justice." We are challenged to think through the grid materially (as so far in §2 I've referred chiefly to material conditions, though the "Freedom!" cry goes beyond, while including the material), & our English word "justice" weights our attention in that direction; but equally we should think through the grid spiritually, as our Christian understandings of "justification" incline us to do.

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|--------------|---|---|
| discontented | A | B |
| contented | C | D |

3. Materially, you (B) & I (A) are daily peppered by **the discontentment industry**, Madison Av. Even if the quality of its products increases, the sheer quantity, ever increasing, is environmentally unconscionable. If I didn't have mine, I'd preach against my getting it: if you (say, a Soweto black) don't have yours, I must preach against your getting it--in the name of "justice," justice to the environment. Because I've got mine, I'm fairly impervious to the advertising industry: if you don't have yours, you're sore tempted to want it (it meaning whatever the advertiser convinces you you need, deserve, really shouldn't have to get along without). Commercial television seeps into all socioeconomic levels, convincing hundreds of millions they're "poor" in the sense of wanting something they don't have. But while I'm materially "C," & "D" about most Americans, I'm "B" for those without the exigencies of existence & that, as judged from their steadily degrading their living-space, there are too many of them: Scrooge's "excess population" has become, for some bio-overburdened areas, a horrendous fact. And I am discontent with a religious leadership that fails even to remark, to say nothing of addressing, that fact but preaches, as justice, supplying all their immediate bio-needs--but touching lightly, if at all, the bio-need of reducing the birthrate & thus doing justice both to future generations & to the earth.

4. Spiritually, as "justified" by grace through faith, "we have enough, yet not too much / to ask for more" (as the hymn has it): I am "CA," in a state of gracious satisfied dissatisfaction; the Kingdom come, but not full-come; justified, but in the process of maturation (called "sanctification" in the Reformation church, "justification" in the early church). I have the same double feeling about you ("BD"), my fellow Christians; & I'm "AB" discontented with my & our efforts to share with nonChristians God's Good News in & through Jesus Christ. Indeed, I consider it unjust to neglect evangelism & missions: justification should lead to the justice of personal witness, to evangelism, to world mission. The prophets have **the discontentment vocation**.

5. How should spiritual/material dis/contentment be related? Of the many observations that come to mind, I choose the mention these:

(1) Different peoples, & different persons, & the same person in different experiences & at different life-stages, experience the material/spiritual distinction all the way from absolute to nonexistent. Because the distinction is of such decisional importance, dramatists--eg, the author of Job--make the distinction radical. For the mystics, on the other hand, the material world is diaphonous of the divine. Saints wear the world lightly, having as if not having (I Co. 7³⁰). Revolutionaries, not having, are hungry to have, & regularly overrate material values.

(2) The biblical God is not Manichean, rating the spiritual higher than the material. But Christianity was early polluted with Manicheanism & NeoPlatonism (the latter, esp. through Pseudo-Dionysius): gnostic Christian sects were radically dualistic; orthodox Christianity fostered monasticism &, generally, a suspicious wariness about the human body. Partly in reaction against this too "spiritual" tradition, modern Western materialism (including Marxism, its dialectical form) preached the priority & even superiority of matter. Twentieth-century Christian revolutionaries have run the danger of reversing the earlier pollution, almost identifying "liberation" (as equal access to material goods & services) with salvation.

(3) Augustinian realism (city of God/man, two intermingled cities) is superior both to city-of-God escapist utopianism & to city-of-man liberationist utopianism. In the sentence that is this Thinksheet's title, I have sought to express the difficulty of the sorting task God has given us here. How much nature-nurture-history "thrownness" ("contingency," in my use here) am I to accept (& so be contented with) in my case? in others'? In both directions, what am I to resist, refuse to accept, be discontented with to the point of action toward change? Reinhold Niebuhr's "to accept what cannot be changed, to change what can [& should] be changed, & the wisdom to know the difference": my insertion of "[]" raises the question of divine guidance.

(4) Mortality (Heidegger's "being-toward-death") relativizes all human conditions. Not only death, but also justification, is a great leveler. Is this now-unsung stanza of "All things bright and beautiful" entirely without merit?: "The rich man in his castle, / The poor man at his gate, / God made the high and lowly / And ordered their estate."* Marx called that upstairs/downstairs Christianity an "opiate" for the pains of the poor, & appreciated its value as such while decrying its stabilizing effect.