



A few weeks ago, I discovered the Amnesty International annual report. It made an impression on me. To anyone reading such a document, one thing becomes immediately apparent: The world is an unkind place. In Iran, heresy is a crime and flogging and limb amputation are valid punishments. In China, the government shows no signs of ceasing its absurd crusade against practitioners of Falun Gong. And, amid all the bombings and hostage-takings, it was less than a year ago soldiers, ostensibly seeking to bring freedom to Iraq, were found to be subjecting Iraqi prisoners to brutal torture.

To me, all this inhumanity of man onto man raises two primal questions. The first is 'Why are people so cruel?' and the second is 'Is there hope for the human race?' These are not new questions. They have been examined again and again throughout human history. I, however, wish to take a somewhat uncommon approach by seeking answers in the framework of certainty and doubt. So let's examine these questions.

First, why are people cruel? What motivates the judges in Iran and the torturers in China and the terrorists in Iraq? The question is easy when, like certain American politicians, you consider these people to be murderous, unthinking demons. The question becomes more difficult when you see these people for what they are: people. Every one of them has experienced love and fear and hope and disillusionment, just like everyone else. I was talking to my mother after telecommunications marketer, Nick Berg, was beheaded in

Iraq and she put the situation's confusing complexity very well. She said it was very likely that some of the masked men who stood behind Mr. Berg in the last moments of his life had children, and it was also likely that at least one was a very good father to those children whom he loved very much.

So why did that father participate in the cold-blooded murder of a civilian? The answer, I think, is certainty. He was so certain what he was doing was just and right and moral that he never stopped to think. He allowed his certainty to steamroll his reason and neutralize his ability to have second thoughts. His was an all-powerful, all-encompassing certainty, a certainty grown and cultivated in an environment where such firmness of purpose is revered as the ultimate virtue.

Clearly, however, when you are looking to reduce the amount of pain that people inflict upon each other, certainty is not a virtue. It is a terrible vice that prevents us from listening to each other. Why was Galileo found guilty of heresy for saying the earth went around the sun, not vice versa? Not because the church officials who tried him were malicious and evil, but because they believed absolutely that they were right. What makes terrorists and torturers tick? Certainty. Certainty causes people to close their minds.

If certainty is such a negative thing, you might ask why so many people indulge in it. I would suggest that they are afraid; afraid of the constantly changing and almost entirely unpredictable world we live in. A fundamental truth of the universe is that just when you think you can relax, life will throw you a curve ball. Everyone knows this and no one likes it, so some people concoct artificial certainty to make themselves feel safe. This is dangerous, because certainty in our own position destroys our ability to understand people with other positions.

Now, the second question. Is there hope? Yes. In doubt. Doubt is the human mind's sole defence against cer-

tainty, but it is a powerful defence and history seems to suggest that we are using it more and more.

For most of its lifespan, human civilization has been governed by varying degrees of authoritarianism. Democracy in its modern form, with one person, one vote regardless of gender, wealth, or race, is very young. Democracy exists because of doubt. All forms of authoritarianism, whether they are despotic, theocratic, communist, or fascist, assume that there is a certain truth about the way in which a government should best be run. Democracy is different. It assumes that the truth about the best form of government is unknown and is likely to remain unknown. From this assumption arises the most fundamental tenet of democracy: Your guess at how government should work is exactly as good as mine. Modern democracy has developed since its beginnings in the Age of Enlightenment and, hopefully, it will continue to develop. Perhaps, to achieve "enlightenment" you need not discover the truth, but only realize that you don't know the truth and begin question your certainties.

Besides protecting us from the dangers of certainty, doubt is also the best way to acquire new information. Without doubt, science and progress are slowed to a crawl. The idea that a theory is valid only as long as no evidence is found to contradict it is central to the scientific method and results in the survival of only the best hypotheses. This idea comes from doubt.

Many elements of our society seem to think that being certain and standing behind your ideals is admirable, but I hope I have convinced you to the contrary. Doubt is admirable, and it is my honest opinion that if we all keep an open and uncertain mind, we will find ourselves in a better world.

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