

## Fulfilment: What Fulfilment?

John McDade SJ

Controversial French author, Michel Houellebecq last week won France's top literary award, the Prix Goncourt, for his novel, *The Map and the Territory*. In his earlier novels, Houellebecq raised insightful questions about the human social condition and the search for happiness, argues John McDade SJ, themes which are also prominent in the writing of Leo Tolstoy, the centenary of whose death will be marked later this week.

New questions are never far from older concerns, the most constant of which is the search for happiness, fulfilment and flourishing. There is a deep concern all around us about what the human good is: how to get it right, how to stabilise the flux of pressures, how to create a community where authentic values can flourish.

Since I became Principal of Heythrop College, I've reminded students every year of the saying, 'If you don't think postmodernism, postmodernism will think you': in other words, if you don't get a perspective on how the culture is making you think and feel you will simply be repeating messages which you have internalised without being aware of them. Can you internalise messages without knowing that this is happening? Of course, and this whole process is central to how every human being, from a baby onwards, constructs his or her identity.

But what do we internalise and how does this shape us? I realised some time ago that the Church no longer acts as a major shaping agent in these islands. The messages in people's heads spring from other sources, but whence and how? In a review of *Atomised*, a novel by Michel Houellebecq, an acerbic, at times nihilistic, French writer, described as a 'bare-knuckle writer who does not pull punches or take prisoners', a 'politically incorrect terrorist of fashionable orthodoxies', David Coward wrote:

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[it] starts from the premiss that in our post-faith, commodity-rich culture, personal gratification has become the highest good. The pursuit of pleasure prioritizes the self and in the process, promotes separation and dispersal. As a result, society has reverted to its fragmented, pre-civilised form and is filled with unlinked, unfulfilled, unhappy egos, the elementary particles and unconnected atoms of the title. [It suggests] that genetic engineering and cloning offer the only way of eluding the

barbarity to which economic materialism, the sexual free market, the sidelining of emotional needs, extreme liberalism and sloppy moral values are leading us.

Bracing stuff, indeed. Houellebecq's third novel, *Lanzarote* focuses on sex tourism and continues his attack on the commodification of human desire. Coward continues:

Since the 1960s, market forces have reorganised the economic activity of the Western world. With the collapse of religion and the death of ideology [presumably Marxism], capitalism acquired a free hand to interfere in those parts of our lives previously governed by faith and political belief.... In the wake of the Enlightenment, believers became citizens. Citizens have now turned into customers, who cannot conceive of a future, let alone of an afterlife, except in terms of increasing wealth and the acquisition of consumer products for status and satisfaction....

Individualism, the antechamber to barbarism, is the grave of communal life and ultimately of civilization. It is also an illusion. Only the decay of the flesh, and death, truly belong to the individual. The rest – behaviour, ideas, ideals – is fed to us by politicians, advertisers and assorted stars who want our votes, our money and our admiration. Even sexuality cannot be explained in terms of desire and pleasure, for they themselves [desire and pleasure] are sociologically determined by widely touted semiologies.<sup>1</sup>

That last comment about semiologies should not defeat you because the point is simple: there are signs that give meaning to the physical. For some people, for example, what they eat is guided by the principle of not eating animals: vegetarianism is the sign that interprets and guides eating. Analogously, sexuality in Christian culture is to be lived in relation to the sign of unconditional, life-giving love between man and woman and the creation of a family, which is, as Coward puts it, ‘the last remaining outpost of the collective spirit, whose members serve each other without hope or expectation of tangible reward’. For Houellebecq, when this sign is replaced by other messages about sexuality and other signs, we have big problems. He’s saying this not from a religious point of view himself – Houellebecq is in fact deeply anti-religious – but he sees this as part of what he regards as part of the barbarism that flows from the social, intellectual and moral deregulation of the 1960s.

If this is so, then there is nothing inside us that is not affected by what is outside us. The idea of an internal freedom of soul with strong ramparts from which to repel the forces of disintegration becomes problematic because this culture gets inside us in a remarkably subtle way. So the refuge of interiority – favoured by spiritual writers throughout the century – as a defence against a de-stabilising world marked by social, intellectual and moral deregulation, is no longer possible. If you grant the case made by Houellebecq and his interpreter David Coward, it is very hard to think that there can be human fulfilment or happiness in ways that can underpin social life. If they are right, we are too isolated from one another, too caught up in the delusions planted within us by a powerful capitalist market place, colonised internally by influences which radically impair the possibility of freedom and human flourishing.

Yet I still have a residual confidence that not all the wells have been poisoned and that there are still streams of life-giving influence which flow into everyone and pass from them to others. In theological terms, this is what we mean by tradition, the transmission of authentic truth-bearing life, attributed to the stream of the Spirit of God, and this never dries up because the reality of God is inexhaustible. If you are a Christian believer, then you hold that the reality of God is what flows into you and others: that’s the point of a doctrine of the Trinity – we spring from and never escape from a contact with uncreated truth and love. Therefore there can be no ultimate crisis which propels humanity into barbarism because the forces that cause us to disintegrate are always faced by the grace that is God’s action within the human community.

For Houellebecq, there is no past to which one can turn, no sources of meaning from which one can draw. By contrast, for the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, the question of happiness can only be answered through an engagement with older messages that modern life wants to consign to oblivion. When he was buried, one of the peasants remarked at his graveside, ‘With too much book learning, you often lose the way’. How true. Tolstoy would have agreed with him and would probably have quoted him because one of his constant themes was that the discovery of purpose in life is to be found neither in books, nor in learning, nor in the company of sophisticates, nor in drawing-room religion; not in any part of a social world ‘which distorts all truthful feelings and inevitably crushes the generous enthusiasm of the mind’. Where then is fulfilment to be found?

Tolstoy’s classic discussion of this comes at the end of *Anna Karenina*. As Anna and her lover, Vronsky descend into moral chaos, Levin – an image of Tolstoy himself – is brought through confusion to a pitch of clarity and purpose. He finally discovers what happiness means, but it is nothing new: ‘I have discovered nothing,’ he says. ‘I have only perceived what it is that I know.’ (At this point you may well wonder how someone could *know* something without realising it – but our knowledge of important things is always implicit and tacit.)

It strikes Levin that he ‘had been happy, when he was not thinking of the meaning of his life’: whatever happiness is, it is not generated by our minds, but lies

elsewhere. His mind, Levin judges, is simply not able to create a happy life because it is not good at laying foundations which sustain contentment. It might tell us *that* we are unhappy, but it cannot generate happiness for us.

But there's a twist in Levin's search: he realises that there is a gap between the way he lives and the way he thinks – who doesn't? – but where we would expect him to say that the gap is between the high ideals he sets himself and the feeble way he puts them into practice, he finds that the reverse is true: he had 'lived well but thought badly'. His way of life was fine, but the way he thought was confused because his thinking had lost touch with the values, principles, attitudes which he had inherited and which still guided his actions, but they made no impression on his thinking.

Levin realises that life itself – and this means for him the religious culture embedded in the lives of ordinary Russian people – had given him the answers about how he would live, but he had allowed his mind to wander far from this glow. These values, bequeathed to him since childhood, and still the spontaneous inspiration of good people around him, were far richer and far more productive of goodness, than the nonsense that had occupied his rootless adult life:

He had been living (without being aware of it) on those spiritual truths that he imbibed with his mother's milk, yet in thinking he had not only refused to acknowledge these truths but had studiously avoided them.

Levin's moment of enlightenment comes when he hears a peasant praise an old man, Platon, for 'living for his soul and remembering God'. *That* is what Levin had been taught, that is what had nourished him all those years by creating the implicit assumptions on which he acted without thinking about them, and yet his mind had never accepted it. The most the wandering mind can do, he realises, is to find its way back to a wisdom shared by simple people and good people and to learn to connect again with the lessons it has forgotten.

And don't all the theories of philosophy do the same, trying by the path of thought, which is strange and not natural to man, to bring him to a

knowledge of what he has known long ago, and knows so surely that without it he could not live.

I don't know if Tolstoy's strategy will work for everyone. I wonder sometimes about our ability to connect to the insights of earlier ages: don't presume that it is easy to interpret the past. What we internalise from our culture can poison the wells of interpretation. Wittgenstein's comment that 'One age misunderstands another; and a *petty* age misunderstands all the others in its own ugly way'<sup>2</sup> seems to me particularly applicable to the modern secularist hatred of the Christian tradition that we saw in full flow in the weeks leading up to the papal visit. Is Houellebecq right in saying that things have collapsed so completely that the combination of capitalism and individualism prevent us from connecting in any serious way with older messages of solidarity and shared religious purpose? The task of theological education is to offer a context in which to consider where we are, how we got here, how we are to live, where the kind of concerns raised positively by Tolstoy and negatively by Houellebecq can be set in a context of faith and inquiry.

So what is fulfilment? Houellebecq cannot be ignored if you want to understand the forces that shape us at a deeper level than we easily acknowledge. There are some things that need to be brought to conscious attention about the way we are, if the question of fulfilment is to be asked and answered. Neither can Tolstoy be ignored if formative virtues and values are to be learned. Perhaps, like Levin, you know what it is already, but your mind has to get in touch with it again. What has shaped you already perhaps gives you the template you need: like Levin, you may be 'living well and thinking badly'. We cannot be too precise about what happiness is: like goodness and integrity to which it is connected, happiness has blurred edges. It may arise in our hearts when we live well in inherited ways, when we're not afraid to 'live for our soul and remember God', and it can come upon us suddenly like grace, like God.

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<sup>1</sup> *Times Literary Supplement* (16 September 2005), 21-2

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein, L., *Culture and Value* (Blackwell, 1998), 98e