

Reflections on Idealism, Realism and the Human Condition

I learned yesterday (late in December 2008) that a documentary film describing the heroic, tragic effort by 22-year old Hannah Senesh to lead an uprising of captive Jews in Hungary in 1944 will appear in theaters in late January, 2009. Senesh was utterly unsuccessful in her endeavor. She was instead captured, tortured and executed by Nazi forces. Her mission could easily be dismissed (and has been) as a young and misguided woman's romantic illusion. After all, she failed and lost her life in a horrific way in the process. And the world lost the possibility of what would likely have been a life of accomplishment and grace. Realists might shake their heads knowingly and wonder how anyone could imagine that sojourning against such odds in the name of an abstract principle of individual freedom could lead one so young and gifted to martyr herself and others for it. After all, these thinkers might suggest, the notion of a right to individual freedom is itself persistently contested in international politics.

The producers and director of the film "Blessed is the Match," after a poem by Senesh, take an opposing view. They suggest that Senesh and her compatriots deserve not only to be remembered, but also held up as models for pressing ahead on the force of their moral convictions and despite the evil and immensity of the odds arrayed against them. This debate between the ideas-oriented philosopher or poet (in the case of Senesh) and the pragmatist/realist is likely as old as humanity itself. Cervantes immortalized it in his deeply affecting portrait of Don Quixote whose imaginary world evinced the possibility of human civility even as it criticized those who could not see "things as they were." International political theory in the post World War II era was shaped by a debate between the so-called realists who favored strong-willed action to pursue supposedly hard-nosed "national interests" and those who sought to build an international system that legitimated other values besides. Similarly, Aristotle, though Plato's most famous pupil, rejected his teachers' tendency to lionize abstract possibility in favor of rooting his analyses in the here and now of the concrete vicissitudes of human existence.

While this long-lived controversy, which ultimately hinges on one's view of the possibility of human agency and the capacity of human beings to undertake altruistic action, is hardly new, I am struck afresh, as I reflect on Senesh, by its significance for governance and by the fact that much hangs in the balance if one "side" or the other ever prevails in this debate. Without those who possess the moral courage and imagination to conceive of new possibilities and to imagine the potential of peaceful co-existence of human beings, individual freedom itself could not likely exist, as Plato famously speculated. Meanwhile, a too-Pollyannaish belief that somehow human evil and selfishness, egoistical capacity for rationalization and self-regard will go away simply because theorized to do so, can only lead to profound disappointment and poorly framed political action. Another way to cast this argument is to ask why it has so persistently been framed as a dichotomous choice. Are human beings inclined to demand epistemic certainties, even if falsely framed ones? Who or what interests serve this long-lived divide? Decades of efforts to obtain peace in deeply divided societies suggest that once adopted, changing dominant ways of knowing in a population is extraordinarily difficult. Ways of considering the other are passed on within families, along with the often-unstated assumptions (well-founded or not) underpinning them. These then go

unexamined and division and hatred can hold full sway. Realists emphasize the relative intractability of these assumptions and therefore frequently dismiss those offering alternate views as romantics in quest of the impossible. Those seeking change are equally ardent advocates of the necessity of their perspective. Both “sides” prototypically dichotomize their arguments.

What can be learned from this hoary controversy that has suffused so much reflection on human behavior, democratic governance and action? Shall the analyst choose “realism” in the name of alleged cleverness and astute action? If so, what will be lost by expecting the least of humankind and behavior in governance? Alternately, does it make any more sense to imagine, given so much evidence of evil and cruelty to the contrary, that one may assume a Quixotic quest for fair-minded action of all whom one encounters?

Perhaps the quest for human possibility entails both and neither. We need frequent reminders from those, like Hannah Senesh, of the power and possibility of hope, moral courage and human imagination in the face of those who would trumpet mediocrity or worse as the best that can be attained among humans. We also need daily reminders from the so-called realists of the profound evil and self-absorption of which human beings are capable. Self-governance demands both the possibilities and abiding belief in human freedom and hope embodied by Senesh and her colleagues and the wisdom embodied in Aristotle’s insistence that all thinking about human beings be rooted in their demonstrated behavior, for good and ill.

The friend of human freedom and democratic governance may not choose to disregard the enormous importance of a belief in the capacity for good of humankind, nor to dismiss its individual and collective capacity to choose and to rationalize evil. However alluring the apparent certainty provided by choosing, this supposed dichotomy represents a false dilemma. The true advocate of freedom rightly lionizes the breathtaking courage, other-regardingness and sheer moral audacity of Senesh, but also realizes that she was tortured and murdered for her convictions by fellow human beings and that the epistemological frames that underpinned both sets of actions are socially constructed by people in search of meaning. There are powerful lessons here for those who would study and seek to inform democratic possibility.