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Dear --

I will try to explain why I gave the name Cordelia to the wife of the Grave Digger’s Boy’s in my play “Lear.” Shakespeare uses a fixed moral “grid” in which some people are innately very good and others innately very bad. This is so even when they have the same parents – though he also suggests that other things may have an influence. This is a theological view (or modernly, a view based on genetic determinism). I wanted to show that someone’s morality really depends on how they understand their situation. Different people may behave very differently in the same situation because it has a different meaning for them. In fact this is what makes us human and not merely animals. It gives us the possibility of being in control of how we understand the situation – and so how we understand ourselves. In fact it’s this that makes us the “dramatic species.” The purpose of drama is to create situations in which the characters come (are forced) to understand their situations differently. Understand in the sense of “know” (even if they then turn knowledge into ignorance – evil is the active corruption of knowledge by a desire based on fear). In life people often have to struggle to survive, or they learn to exploit others, or they take images (Gods and so on) of their imaginations as reality and obey their commands – which are really the political orders of society’s owners and rulers. But drama creates pure situations in which these pressures don’t apply. Drama is fiction – and yet to engage its audience it must use the same processes that audiences use in constructing their own lives. This makes fiction a vital element in human reality – and it absolutely cannot be that in the existence of any other animal (if it were evolution would go backwards to extinction). It is not just possible for humans but necessary – because imagination gives us an extra dimension of reality: we can change the meaning reality has for us. But this also makes us vulnerable. The mad are dominated by their imaginations and ideologies give great power to political authority even though it is unjust. Its also why audience’s take drama seriously. They are aware that drama comes from the centre of their own lives and therefore is about the meaning of the audience. It isn’t an entertaining escape from life but is on the contrary a confrontation with the reality of their life. Only drama can activate (I use the word “enact”) the processes of that centre. Once the processes are started they cannot easily be controlled by prejudice. All that is very theoretical – but it is necessary, firstly because we don’t understand what drama is, and secondly because the theory deals with the relation between the audience and the play. The play itself is about something else: the relation between people in society, between the family and the state, the nation or creed and their opponents and enemies. This creates situations which drama inveigles you into understanding differently. In society these situations are matters of politics and economics. And to be sources of humanness these situations cannot be resolved by politics and economics but only by human understanding of what the situation is. Its only then that we can distinguish between reality and imagination and see how morality is created on the boundary between these two things.

It’s time I gave you a practical example: the Grave Digger’s Boy (GDB). He is free of the corruptions of power associated with Lear and his courtiers. He lives beyond the wall and outside political
problems: its a sort of Rousseau idyllic paradise (at least when compared to the wall-world of Lear and his people). But human reality is historically conflictual and so the conflicts must be faced: there are good and bad people and if we don't resolve these conflicts we and others will suffer because of them. And so in the play the GDB begins as good – he befriends and protects Lear. But the wall-people raid his idyllic retreat and destroy it. The GDB's answer would be to retreat further and find a more remote idyll. He becomes the ghost that tempts Lear with the idyll. But in the modern world there is absolutely nowhere to hide from the problem of being human. And that problem is not limited to your own self, your relation to your family or to a God or some other reliquary or depository of ideological escape. Your problem is your relation to every other human being. This is of course an ancient precept but it was always mediated through some other authority, some God. But the God is now the ghost of the Grave Digger's Boy. We are human only if we ourselves require to be human – not because someone else or something else requires it. I have an image to suggest this: that when a child is born in that room waiting for it is every other human being who could possibly be born. This is part of the geography of reality. But the idea could itself be another GDB! – an ancient idea, a retreat from reality, that modern dictators, commerce and technology could obliterate. Ultimately the badness and goodness does not have origins in people but in their situations. If you can make those situations more just then you increase moral understanding and moral necessity. There is no other way to free us from conflict – and this is why we are the dramatic species: drama is the process through which justice confronts us. In society injustice leads to madness and in politics to exploitation and then war and terrorism. We have the right to defend others against mad dogs . . . but only if we are not ourselves mad. This is why there are no police in Greek drama – not even in Antigone: the soldier never discusses the nature of law and justice, the discussion is between Antigone and Creon (and their parties) because justice cannot be reduced to the law, it must always be annunciated in terms of the self – and this involves the processes of drama, the relation between the self-subjective and the shared-objective. In this way the theoretical understandings on which civilizations depend are made practical and personal. Our situation is dangerous because now we have no drama – only the theatre of the market. And so society becomes increasingly unjust and so will become increasingly violent.

I hope these remarks are useful. Your question goes to the heart of the play's problem. Best wishes --